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+ WOMEN'S WORLD CUP GUIDE

FourFourTwo



FUTURE

WOMEN'S WORLD CUP 2023

RISE OF THE LIONESSES

First Europe. Next the world. England are ready... are you?

THE FALL OF MK DONS • ROGER DALTREY • GREEK CUP FINAL

WELCOME

Last summer the Lionesses roared their way to victory in the Euros on home soil, and now 12 months on they are aiming to conquer the world Down Under. It hasn't been a straightforward build-up for Sarina Wiegman's side, with a number of high-profile injuries, but England remain one of the favourites to win the tournament in Australia and New Zealand.

In this issue, we chat to Alessia Russo, Georgia Stanway and Alex Greenwood about the Lionesses' quest to lift the World Cup. We also have a full team-by-team guide to the competition, so you'll be fully prepared for the big kick-off.

Elsewhere, we look back on David Beckham's time at Real Madrid, two decades on from him swapping Manchester for the Spanish capital, and we sit down with Liverpool's Diogo Jota to discuss his return to scoring form and love of *FIFA*.

We also meet Romanian icon Gheorghe Hagi, who answers your questions and reveals how close he came to moving to England.

A note for your diaries: the next issue is our Season Preview (yes, really) and will be in shops on July 20, complete with an extra supplement looking ahead to the 2023-24 campaign. As always, it's one not to be missed.

Enjoy the mag.



James Andrew
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5 THINGS YOU'LL LEARN INSIDE

1. Why Selhurst Park could have hosted this year's Greek Cup final
2. Which club's British Bulldog sessions often ruled players out of games
3. Why Gheorghe Hagi once signed for four clubs at the same time
4. Which star technically still owes Diogo Jota six months of rent
5. Which match had to be halted recently following an invasion of bees

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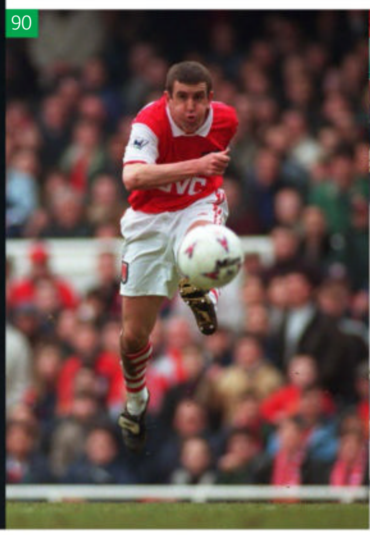
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YOU ASK THE QUESTIONS

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"Tottenham made a good offer, but it wasn't about money – when Johan Cruyff calls and asks you to join Barcelona, it's hard to say no"

GHEORGHE HAGI

Twenty-two years after retiring as a player, Gheorghe Hagi still lives and breathes football.

Romania's greatest ever footballer enchanted the globe with his skills during a 19-year career, representing both Real Madrid and Barcelona, as well as helping his country to the quarter-finals of the 1994 World Cup. His retirement coincided with Romania's descent back into the shadows of international football; now, he's on a mission to give his country a better future in the game.

After returning to his home city on the Black Sea coast in 2009 to found his own club, Viitorul Constanta, with an emphasis on producing young talent, he became their manager and guided them to the Romanian league title in 2017. A merger with city neighbours Farul Constanta followed in 2021, and in the 2022-23 campaign he took Farul to the domestic title, too.

FourFourTwo headed to Constanta to meet Hagi in the latter stages of that title race, sitting down to chat after he had held an analysis meeting with his staff, as he looked for every last detail in their quest for glory. "I was born to win, not just to exist," he says with a smile.

Fortunately, the 58-year-old has done plenty of winning during his life in the game – and he's ready to answer your questions about all of it...

Did playing barefoot when you were young help your technique later on?
Emi Banciu, via Facebook
I grew up like every kid: we played in the street a lot and spent more time outdoors than indoors. Football was a big part of my life ever since I can remember, and everything we did had an impact on who we became. Johan Cruyff was my idol. When I opened my eyes as a football fan, I fell in love with the Dutch team of the '70s. I loved Ajax, too. I loved everything Cruyff did.

When you were only 14, you were prevented from playing for a full year – what was that like?
Mirela Stoica, Constanta
I was suspended because my dad wouldn't allow me to go to Bucharest and join the Luceafarul development programme. He thought I was too young. I was suspended, but I could still train at my home club. I never missed training during that year, because I loved football. Nothing could stop me. I got picked again by Luceafarul and my parents let me go that time. It was an amazing feeling.

Did you really play for FC Constanta and also for Luceafarul in the second division on the same weekend? How?
Robert Balauru, Bucharest
It's true. Games with Luceafarul were usually on Sunday mornings at 11am. My team from Constanta were playing in Romania's top division on Saturdays at 5pm. I used to travel when I could so that I could play for both of them.



Was it special when Mircea Lucescu gave you your Romania debut at 18, after only one season of senior football with FC Constanta? He even made you captain two years later.
Dominik Breban, Craiova
Playing for Romania was fantastic. You need someone to believe in you, to put you in the team. Lucescu had the courage to do it. He aimed to promote and support talent, to speed up their progress. That's what I'm doing now at my club. I learned it from him: to always take care of the new talented players. You must raise, adapt, introduce and promote them, and help them to become leaders. I was very proud to wear Romania's shirt, and the armband whenever I had the chance.

How did you end up signing for three clubs at once, in 1983?
Sam Howard, Cheltenham
There were actually four. They wanted me and I didn't want to upset anyone; they all made good offers, so I signed for all four of them! [*Laughs*] In the end, the clubs negotiated between themselves and I ended up at Sportul Studentesc. Dinamo Bucharest, Steaua Bucharest and Universitatea Craiova had also convinced me to sign, but I went to Sportul, the students' team in Bucharest. They waited for me at the airport following a national team game, so I decided to go and train and play for them.

When you joined Steaua Bucharest in 1987, is it true they signed you just on a one-game loan for the UEFA Super Cup, then never let you return? You did score the winning goal...
Cristian Benta, via Twitter
I was with Sportul Studentesc for three and a half wonderful years. Sportul basically raised me. I never had any pressure to win; I could grow in a team where you could play extraordinary football. But I needed a team to help me improve myself – to challenge me. I knew I had to make that move and I did it, even if I had to have numerous discussions with the club president. When I joined Steaua, I wanted to stay there permanently, not be moved back and forth. Everyone was aware of it.

How good were Milan to beat Steaua 4-0 in the 1989 European Cup Final?
Maddie Powell, Leicester
It was very hard to get past Paolo Maldini, I can assure you of that! [*Laughs*] He had everything – he was ▸



CLUBS (PLAYER)
1982-83 FC Constanta
1983-87 Sportul Studentesc
1987-90 Steaua Bucharest
1990-92 Real Madrid
1992-94 Brescia
1994-96 Barcelona
1996-2001 Galatasaray

COUNTRY (PLAYER)
1983-2000 Romania

CLUBS (MANAGER)
2001 Romania
2003 Bursaspor
2004-05 Galatasaray
2005-06 Politehnica Timisoara
2007 Steaua Bucharest
2010-11 Galatasaray
2014-20 Viitorul Constanta
2021- Farul Constanta



a complete player. Milan made us feel like they were the best; too strong for us, too fresh. These things make you learn. You can't win all of the time – you lose sometimes – but what makes you better is if you learn from that.

Players weren't allowed to leave Romania before the end of the communist rule in 1989. By then, you were nearly 25 years old. Would you have liked to move abroad earlier? What impact did the country's revolution have on your career?
Marco Zavattaro, via Facebook
There was interest in me all of the time, but I wouldn't want to change anything. I had a very good career – I can't be unhappy about anything. I'm proud to be among the very few foreigners to have played for both Real Madrid and Barcelona, after I left Romania in 1990. Both clubs taught me a lot. I left both of them better than when I came, in many ways: I learned the culture; I was educated in their spirit; they brainwashed me and put inside my brain the idea that

"AFTER THE FALL OF COMMUNISM, EVERYONE IN ROMANIA WANTED TO CONQUER AMERICA"

I could be the best in the world. After the Romanian Revolution, I kept in mind only one thing: that I could become the best and play anywhere, something I couldn't do before 1989. I understood that it was up to me to do something – that the sky was the limit. I could make my own decisions and show how ambitious I was. That's why I got where I wanted to be.

How did it feel to join a legendary club in Real Madrid?
Julian Stewart, Winchester
When the president of the club came to Bucharest and wanted to see me, I felt honoured. He didn't have to tell me much; talks didn't last for long. The change was huge from a few points of view. You change your way of living, eating and communicating. It took me around four months to adapt. The first month was very difficult, but then I started to get used to the language and I started communicating with the media and everyone around me. That was one of the most important things. I learned the language by myself. Bit by bit, everything started to return to normal and I started feeling good, playing well and becoming an important player for the team.

My second year there was amazing for me personally, but unfortunately we lost the last game to miss out on the league title, and also lost the final of the Copa del Rey. Losing those games fuelled my decision to leave Real Madrid and start looking for a new adventure elsewhere.

Was it a difficult decision to move to Brescia in 1992, given that they weren't one of the more famous names in Serie A? Mircea Lucescu was manager there - how influential was he in your choice?
Chris Allport, via Facebook
Lucescu influenced my decision very much. He was the coach who had promoted me to the Romanian national team when I was just a kid, of course. Brescia were in Serie A, I wanted a new experience and he insisted very much, so I decided in their favour and learned a lot there.

We got relegated to Serie B and it was a shock, really, to be in the Italian second tier after where I had been before. It took me a few months to accept the idea. It was hard. I had an offer from Napoli but I wasn't allowed to go and I was very upset about that. After a while, though, I was fine again; I had the power to get up and play my best football. I wanted to return to where I was, and I was the only one who could change something. I focused and returned to being the player I used to be before. I helped the team to return to Serie A football again, then the 1994 World Cup happened. My ambition to rise again was immense.



Romania reached USA 94 after Paul Bodin's penalty miss in the final qualifier in Cardiff. How big was the relief as his shot hit the crossbar?
Philip Reid, Chepstow
Who knows what would've happened if that one went in? We faced a strong side, but we knew we were strong, too. We had missed out on qualification for Euro 92 after doing well at the 1990 World Cup and reaching the second round. We had gained experience. Moments like Bodin's penalty added to that rollercoaster of emotions.







Clockwise from left Big celebrations in Cardiff; playing for Cruyff, Hagi's childhood hero; future managerial greats, and Ronald Koeman; when an unveiling foresees relegation; practice made for an iconic goal

Was the 1994 World Cup the highlight of your career?
Adam Bateman, via Twitter
I went to the US with one thought in my mind: I wanted to win the World Cup. That's what I dreamed of and I tried to pass my desire on to the whole group. We were in form and playing well – young, but more experienced than in 1990. Everyone in Romania wanted to conquer America. After the fall of communism, we wanted to go to the free world. You can go a long way with sport, just as Romania did in gymnastics and tennis. It was football's turn to go and conquer. We played very well and were Romania's ambassadors.

You said that you "looked up and had a crazy instinct to shoot" for your famous goal from the touchline against Colombia at USA 94. Were those instincts a big reason for your success during your career?
Edward Slater, via Instagram
It was the most difficult goal to score. It takes talent, personality, inspiration, power, decision and risk – all of those things. You're not afraid to try when you feel that you're good and fit. It took preparation, and we prepared for it. We knew our opponents. Bogdan Stelea, our goalkeeper, can tell you about that – what happened in the game against Colombia also happened to him two days before the match, when we were training. We knew the positioning of the goalkeeper and we practised with Stelea coming out. I also scored from the halfway line for both Real Madrid and Barcelona, just to keep them both happy! [*Laughs*]

I always tell my players: believe in what you're doing and have courage. If there's no courage, you can't risk. I always took a look at the keeper to see his position. My thought was always to shoot from long range, ever since I was a kid. My first coach told me to shoot as much as I could, so I opted to shoot rather than lose the ball many times in my career. I scored incredible goals thanks to that sense I had. I scored more than 300 goals in my career and around 70 per cent of them were from outside the box.

What did it mean to beat Argentina 3-2 in the World Cup last 16? Is that Romania's greatest ever victory?
Hugh Hill, Ipswich
It's regarded as the most beautiful game at the World Cup, right? It was a game with lots of chances for both sides, fantastic goals and fabulous counter-attacks – I remember I did a 70-metre sprint after 80 minutes of immense effort in terrible heat in California. I can't pick one game as our best ever victory, though, even though we played a very good match against Argentina. It was the same when we beat Colombia, and when we beat England in 1998 and 2000. We should never forget any of those games – we fought the biggest teams in the world and were their equals. We had the ball and dominated games. We were good!

How did your move to Barcelona in the summer of 1994 come about?
Ibrahim Ayyub, via Facebook
I received a phone call from Johan Cruyff. He was one of the big reasons why I went to Barcelona. Even before that World Cup in 1994, he said I was the best No.10 in Europe. When such a big club wants you and gives you the opportunity to work with your idol and learn Total Football, what can you say?

He changed football with what he did as a manager at Barcelona. His system and the way he saw football was just amazing. He encouraged offensive football; he wanted us to play forward, to score. In two years at Barcelona, I learned a lot: how to dominate; how to position yourself on the field; how to balance attack and defence. He put the fundamentals in my brain. He influenced me back then and he still does. What I learned from Cruyff is part of my philosophy now – I'm trying to use it as much as I can.

Which did you enjoy the most, your time at Real Madrid or at Barcelona?
Jonathan Tembo, via Twitter
It's impossible to separate them. I feel proud and honoured to have represented both. Everything I did was worth it – all of the sacrifices, all of the struggles I had. You have to struggle in order to win; you encounter difficult moments and I'm glad I got so far. Real Madrid and Barcelona are huge clubs. I loved playing for both, I was educated by both, and I offered a lot at both the Bernabeu and Camp Nou.

Did any English clubs try to sign you during your career? There were reports that Newcastle came close.
Brighton Electricity FC, via Instagram
I liked Kevin Keegan a lot as a kid – he was one of my idols, too – so I would have loved to play under him at Newcastle, but it didn't quite happen. Tottenham also came with an offer that was really good, but the money didn't matter so much – when Cruyff calls you in person and asks you to go to Barcelona, it's hard to say no.

When Dan Petrescu played for Sheffield Wednesday, the big rumour was that he advised you to join him at the club. Was Hagi to Hillsborough ever possible?
Matthew Theobald, via Facebook
In 1996 a lot of rumours linked me to various clubs in the Premier League, but I opted to head closer to Romania and sign for Galatasaray. Their project was big: they were aiming to build continental success. I definitely would have loved to play in England, though – it's a league that I liked and followed. I still watch it now. There's a fantastic football culture. I was always loved and respected in England, and I had some great performances against English opposition – I think I never lost ▸



against them. It would have been great to play in the Premier League, but it probably wasn't meant to be. I'm sorry it didn't happen. I believe fans would have enjoyed my style.

Did you think you'd become a legend at Galatasaray? What was your aim? I met you at Istanbul airport when I was nine and I'll never forget it.
Iskender Pala, via Instagram
Galatasaray were a big European club. They wanted me badly. I knew I was going to a club that wanted to win, and it did. Turkey as a country had amazing potential and I believed it could win a European trophy. They can fight with the biggest countries because of their budgets and infrastructure. As I said before, I was born to win, not just to exist; if I do something, I do it with the desire to win. Let me just tell you that when I signed for Galatasaray, I asked for a bonus in my contract in case we won a European trophy – that's how strong my belief was that we could do something big. I was trying to prove a point, to change the mentality. And we won the 2000 UEFA Cup, beating Arsenal in the final.

Where does the UEFA Cup win with Galatasaray rank in your career?
Nick Kelsall, via Instagram
It's a fantastic memory; a massive night in front of a great opponent, with an amazing atmosphere in Copenhagen. The young Turkish players had enthusiasm and energy. They were hungry. We, the foreign players such as Gica Popescu, Claudio Taffarel and myself, were playing with our brains more than our feet because we were over 30. Galatasaray ended up winning the UEFA Cup and the Super Cup, and beating great sides in the Champions League. You can do everything in football. Nothing's impossible. You have to believe in order to achieve it. That Galatasaray team also produced almost half of the squad that took Turkey to the semi- finals of the 2002 World Cup.

What was the reasoning behind the whole Romania squad deciding to bleach their hair blond during the 1998 World Cup in France?
Chris Sergeant, via Twitter
We placed a bet with the coach. We said it was possible to get six points from our first two group matches, and that was our way to say we could do it: we placed a bet and won both games against Colombia and England, so we kept our word. The manager needed to shave his head and we had to dye our hair. It was Dan Petrescu's fault – he made that bet! [*Laughs*]

In your 124th and final appearance for Romania, you were sent off for diving against Italy in the last eight of Euro 2000. Should it have been a penalty?
Mihnea Nichifor, via Facebook
Yes. Gianluca Zambrotta came from behind and touched my leg, I couldn't make the next step and I fell. That's how it happened. My years in the national team were extraordinary – that moment is in the past.

What was it like to play in the exhibition game in Milan to mark Pele's 50th birthday in 1990?
Filip Donceanu, Cluj
And score! I remember that game very well. I hit the net from a free-kick. There were great players next to me, but I was allowed to shoot – I was very proud of that. I felt that I could score, and I had the personality to make those around me believe that as well. After the game, we had dinner with the great Pele. I asked for an autograph and offered it to a friend from Steaua. His father loved Pele so much that he named his son 'Pele' on the birth certificate.

Did you like having the nickname, 'The Maradona of the Carpathians'?
Damien Tooher, via Facebook
If you're 20 and you're compared to a God of the game, would you mind? [*Smiles*] We were alike in a way: left-footed, small and fast. It was a big challenge to play against him at the World Cup – a great clash in 1990 in Italy. I'd just signed for Real Madrid, I felt great, and I think I did well. Diego Maradona was one of a kind. I'd met him when he was younger and we played together in an exhibition game. He was fantastic, with an incredible technique that marked an era.

"WHEN I SIGNED FOR GALATASARAY, I ASKED FOR A BONUS IF WE WON A EUROPEAN TROPHY"









HIGHS & LOWS

HIGH: 1987
Scores Super Cup winner as Steaua beat Dynamo Kyiv

LOW: 1993
Relegated to Serie B in his first season with Brescia

HIGH: 1994
Named in World Cup team of the tournament

LOW: 1996
Unable to stop Romania losing all three matches at the Euros

HIGH: 2000
Helps Galatasaray to their first European trophy, the UEFA Cup

Left to right "Boom, here comes the bonus"; the bleach suited some players better than others; creating a club, managing it to a league title, merging it with another and winning the title again: not bad

Which did you prefer: a beautiful goal or a great assist?
Liam Dawson, Rotherham
I scored goals, but I wasn't a top goalscorer. I was a creator. The number on my shirt was 10 most of the time, and I knew what that meant: to create a goal or score. My biggest joy was to find a decisive pass for the striker. Forwards scored a lot of goals with me in their team. They were lucky to have me offering my support and passes! [*Laughs*]

How do you look back on your spell as the boss of Romania's national team? It was your first job in management, coming almost immediately after your retirement, but you lasted only four games.
Nina Negutesco, Timisoara
It was a mistake – I shouldn't have accepted the offer to take over. It was Romania calling and I was always ready to jump in when Romania called. But, looking back, it wasn't the right decision.

What was it like to form a new club in 2009, in Viitorul Constanta?
Petru Dinescu, Brasov
I wanted to give something back, to leave a legacy, because football gave me everything. I always felt indebted. I returned to Constanta because it's where I was born. This is my place. It made me. Beforehand, I told my wife about my plans, and my friends sometimes said that I was crazy. My wife and I have two kids together, then we added 200 more – the 200 in the academy and the seniors team! When I was a player, I tried to make my dreams come true; in Constanta, I have worked every day to make kids' dreams turn into reality. We promote players and produce talents.

Before we merged with Farul Constanta in 2021, my team's name was Viitorul, which translates as 'The Future', and we have been working to build the future here. The idea of the academy started to take form in my brain during my final years as a player. In my last years with Galatasaray, I started reading, learning, writing down everything, taking notes. Football inspires me.

You became Viitorul Constanta's manager in 2014. Three years later, the club were Romanian champions. How were you able to have such success without a big budget?
Conor Griffiths, Oxford
Success needs to be planned. We worked with passion, took it step by step from the lower leagues, and never moved away from our strategy and our principles. I believe in the talent of the Romanian player. The cups and trophies we won at youth and senior levels only encourage us to keep going and show our mentality is right.

I think every club in the world with an academy must promote at least one player per season to the seniors. It's impossible not to have a kid in the academy who deserves the chance. If you don't, then something's wrong. We have a clear philosophy. We could use more money, that's for sure, and it could take the club to the next level. But we are trying to compete within our means.

Was it a tough call to merge Viitorul with Farul Constanta in 2021?
Costea Milcu, Sighisoara
The merger was what both clubs needed. We're building something. The city needed a brand; a spirit. When I was a kid, I'd jump inside the stadium to watch the team in Constanta play and the stadium was full. This season, we've been top of the table and you can feel that things are going in the right direction. It's buzzing again. Hopefully, we will have a new stadium soon and be able to make the next step for our team.

Would Gheorghe Hagi the manager want Gheorghe Hagi the player in his team?
Owen Palmer, Enfield
Hagi the manager would be very happy! [*Laughs*] I had personality on the pitch, my ball control was good, and I was fast. I think I'd discipline Hagi the player, though. Even if you have a great player in your team, you need to make him able to play with those around him. Individual quality is something I like and encourage, but a player needs to know how to be part of a team. I love attacking players who are creative and have skills – players with personality and talent – but we must fight to become the best. I am working to create champions – world champions, if possible. I believe in this. You need to set the biggest goals and believe tirelessly. Otherwise, you aren't going to do much.

How long will it be before we see a Romania national team that is a real force again?
Tony Agg, via Facebook
We hope to be there again as soon as possible. That should be our aim: to be competitive on the international stage.

Would you have liked to have played at Ibrox, like your son, Ianis?
William Rutherford, via Facebook
Ianis plays for a great club and he's doing a lovely job there. I know the passion of the fans, that dimension of the club, and how they live for Rangers. Ianis is in the right place. Sometimes I'm there in the stands, supporting him. The stage at Rangers is his. I also experienced the Scottish fans' passion and the feeling is amazing.

Do you ever miss your playing days?
Elena Mason, Blyth
I played, I gave everything, and now I have another role. I sometimes play with my boys in training, but less and less. I'm getting old and the age difference is quite big! [*Laughs*] But it's wonderful to be a football player, absolutely wonderful. A player's life is beautiful – the greatest life one can have, if you know how to live it. I was free; I had popularity; I enjoyed the game. I had talent and tried to make the most of it each time I stepped on the grass. I'm the same person now as I was then. My brain is the same. I am not happy just to exist. I want to win.



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Playing by the rules isn't really in the Juve DNA, is it? Their execution of 'stripes' here is loose at best. Adidas claim that the fuzzy lines are a deliberate print effect designed to replicate the fur of a zebra. They're also calling that yellow trim 'bold gold'. None of it should work, and yet it kind of... does?

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GOT GEAR? **GET IT IN THE MIXER** SEND IT TO **@KETCHELLFC** ON INSTAGRAM



DIRE STRAITS X NEWCASTLE UNITED VINYL ART

tolhurstvinylart.com £59.99

What you're looking at here is Newcastle United's club badge from the 1980s cut into an original 7" record of *Local Hero* by Dire Straits. *Local Hero* is played before every kick-off at St. James' Park, so this is hitting music, nostalgia and football all at once in a strong bid for supporters' credit card details. There are dozens of other club equivalents available and, yes, they can do requests.



1988-90 MAN UNITED X ORIGINALS COLLECTION

adidas.co.uk Shirt £80 Jacket £130

Three-striped catnip for Manchester United fans, Adidas' nostalgic capsule collection comprises a dozen pieces inspired by the start of the Fergie era... the bit where he started winning trophies, at least. At the heart of it are like-for-like remakes of the club's third jersey (modelled by frequent Fergie hairdryer victim Lee Sharpe) and the bench jacket sported by Fergie teacher's pet, Denis Irwin.

PUMA PURSUIT PACK £80-£200

puma.com

Fancy a striking look for five-a-side? These are the wheels of choice for Neymar – though there's a fair chance he'll never get to wear them, as their release coincided with news that Ney had suffered an ankle knack. Thankfully, other big-hitters such as Kingsley Coman donned them in the pursuit of trophies, while Barcelona Femeni stars Ariadna Mingueza and Fridolina Rolfo have both been enjoying the women-specific fits.



THE MIXER



LIVERPOOL '89 CYCLING JERSEY £42
footballcycling.co.uk
Big 'why-didn't-I-think-of-that' energy from this genius product – the Football Cycling Club have beaten everyone to it and married the boom in cycling with the lucrative business of retro football shirts. *FFT* road-tested one and they're great quality, comfortable, breathable and have those deep pockets at the back for Jelly Babies and all of that other cycling bumf.



THIRTY – SIX LAZER GLOVES
36gkgloves.co.uk £38
Goalkeeper coach Ross Morecroft wanted to have a go at creating his own keeper gloves, so he did. These sleek mits – tested at non-league and grassroots levels – have a friendly price point but come full of top goalkeeping glove tech, including moveable finger spines and silicon-injected fingertips to minimise twisting, maximise security and, hopefully, prevent a few goals.

REQUIRED READING



LIONESSES: GAMECHANGERS
Abdullah Abdullah
pitch publishing £12.99
Victory in the Euro 2022 Final last summer was a watershed moment for women's football in England and spawned a proliferation of literature, including a raft of autobiographies and celebratory tomes. Here, Sarina Wiegman's trophy-winning tactics come under the microscope.

As well as each and every game, the performances of individuals including Fran Kirby and Lucy Bronze, and the fierce competition for places within the squad, are analysed closely. Such studies can overlook the excitement and passion of football festivals, but there's colour and verve in Abdullah's writing and he sets the scene well, not least for the final against arch rivals Germany at Wembley.

The author's focus on the squad's prospects at the forthcoming World Cup in Australia and New Zealand is undermined somewhat by long-term injuries sustained by Beth Mead and Leah Williamson, which has ruled them both out of the tournament. They will prove difficult to replace.

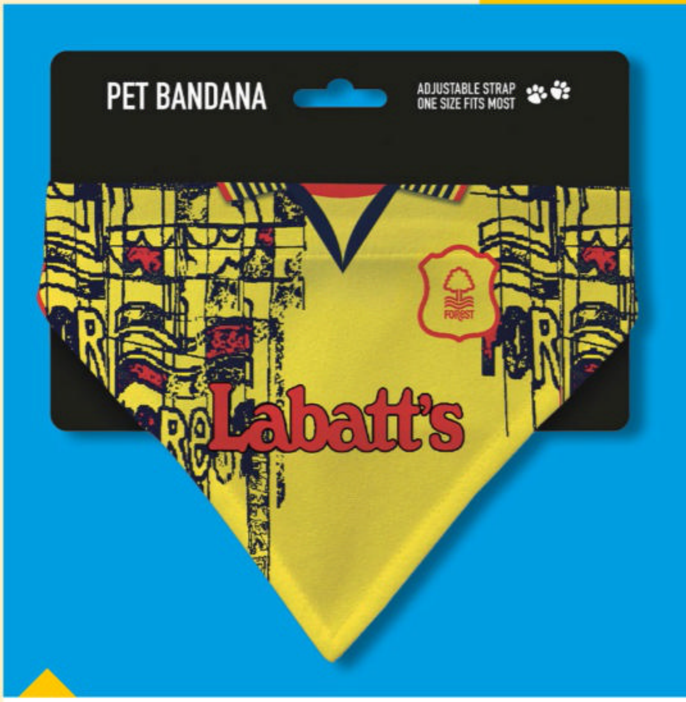
Nonetheless, *Gamechangers* is further evidence that, like women's football itself, books on the subject are rapidly becoming more scientific and analytical. It's an intelligent and studiously researched piece of work.
Jon Spurling



2023 OAKLAND ROOTS SC X MEYBA HOME JERSEY

oaklandrootssc.com £73

Meyba made Barcelona shirts for 10 years in the era of Cruyff and Maradona; today they're working with Californian club Oakland Roots of the USL, one level below MLS. Oakland promote awareness for indigenous history, support half a dozen non-profit organisations and use football as a social force for good – even more reason, then, to buy a shirt so cool you'll be stopped in the street.



NOTTINGHAM FOREST 1997 PET BANDANA

theterracestore.com £11.99

Brilliant, eh? What an image: man's best friend trotting out for night-time wee-wees, sporting Nottingham Forest's 1997 away shirt as a little bandana. There are literally hundreds of team variations of this tremendous accessory available, from early-80s kits to shirts and sponsors from the 2022-23 season – just make sure you don't bump into a rival club's dog while down the park.



ADIDAS X PRADA BOOT COLLECTION

adidas.co.uk £500

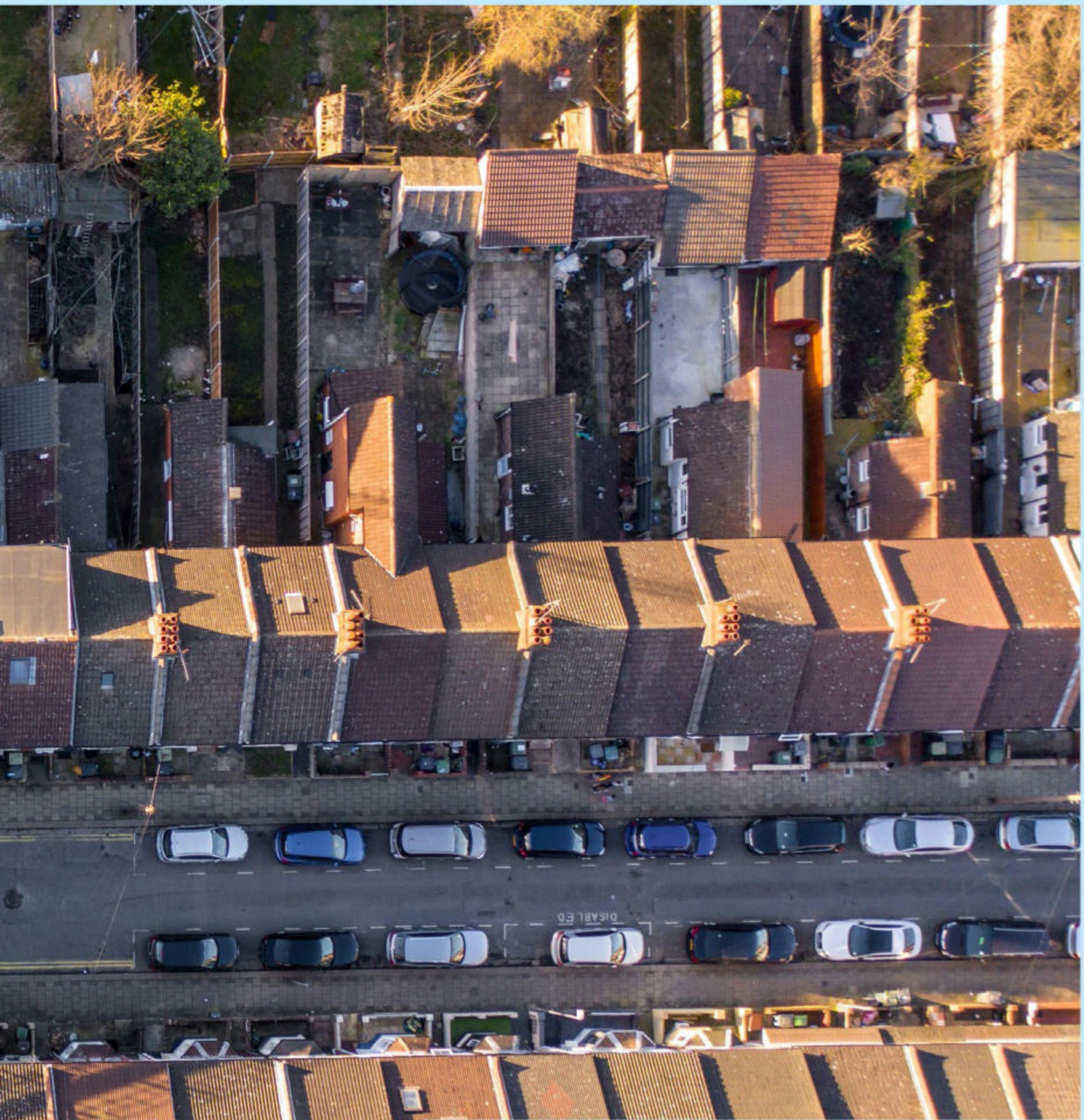
Who saw this coming? Adidas' Predator, Copa and X boots have had the high-end fashion treatment, fitted out with luxury materials and design details more synonymous with the catwalks of Paris and Milan. Naturally, they're expensive, limited in number and unlikely to be stocked in your local Sports Direct – still, at least the devil can go for a kickabout now.



UPFRONT

Playing off the last defender, it's the big-man-little-man partnership of football and funnies...

THE BEAUTIFUL GAME



← "CAN WE HAVE OUR BALL BACK, PLEASE?"

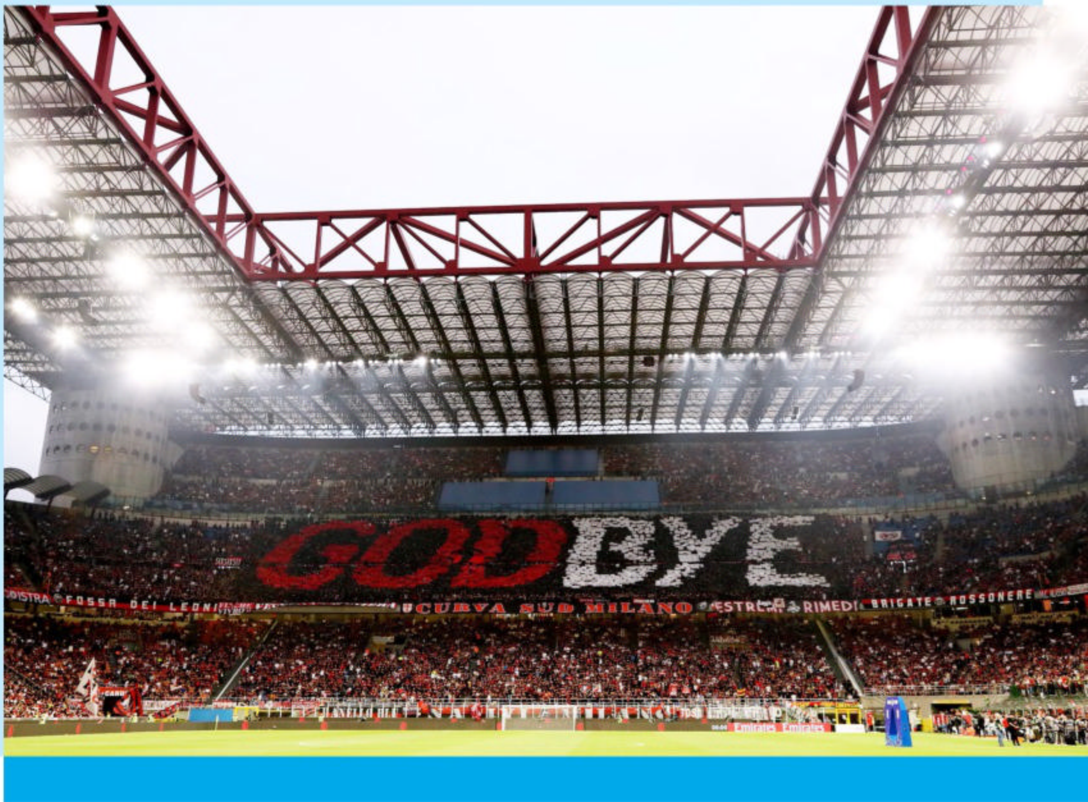
LUTON, ENGLAND

The residents around Kenilworth Road will find a Premier League logo on any balls landing in their garden next season, after Luton won an incredible promotion at Wembley. The Kenny will have nearly £10m of improvement work to meet requirements for TV, VAR and prawn sandwiches, but its unique feel will remain. ***Photo*** *CloudVisual / Alamy Stock*

↓ A QUIET FAREWELL

MILAN, ITALY

Zlatan Ibrahimovic wouldn't have wanted any fuss upon his retirement, so he must have been furious that Milan fans saw him off with this banner (though we're told the typo is deliberate). The 41-year-old – who had been expected to carry on for another season – bowed out after nearly 1,000 appearances for club and country, and told the jeering Verona fans, "Keep booing. This is the biggest moment of your year, seeing me." Never change. ***Photo*** *Marco Luzzani / Getty*





"DIMITAR BERBATOV SAID, 'MATE, WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT ABOUT? WHAT A CRAZY PERFORMANCE'"

JERMAINE JENAS

GAMES THAT CHANGED MY LIFE

Nottm Forest 1-0 Bradford

September 20, 2001
First Division

"I was 18 years old and had recently broken into the Forest team. I was the kid that everyone was speaking about and rumours had started that clubs wanted to buy me. Scouts were sent down to see me in action. You take it all in – you know this can happen to a professional player. Bradford had just been relegated from the Premier League, so they were the money club in the league: they had Benito Carbone and Stuart McCall. They were a top side and this was a big test against a good Championship outfit. My memories are scoring the only goal, playing well and coming off afterwards thinking, 'That was a big moment'. It was an evening game, the pressure was on, everyone was talking about me and I delivered. That was a step in the right direction."

Sunderland 0-1 Newcastle

February 24, 2002
Premier League

"A couple of months later, I was the third-most expensive teenager in the world. Newcastle had paid £5 million and all eyes were on me. I made a late cameo against Southampton, then we faced Sunderland in the derby and I'd been terrible in training. Bobby Robson pulled me aside on the Thursday and said, 'Sort yourself out: you're starting on Sunday'. We went to the Stadium of Light and won 1-0 thanks to Nikos Dabizas' header. I remember standing in midfield and [Sunderland's] Jason McAteer saying, 'Jeez, how about this for an atmosphere on your first start?' The ground was rocking. But that was the first game where I believed I could really be a Premier League player. The biggest thing was that I'd earned the respect of my Newcastle team-mates."

Tottenham 5-1 Arsenal

January 22, 2008
League Cup semi-final second leg

"Winning the League Cup was huge, but the two games before that against Arsenal were probably my two finest performances in a Spurs shirt. Juande Ramos gave me loads of confidence; he'd always say, 'Get yourself forward, don't worry about what's behind you'. I got the opener in the first leg at the Emirates Stadium, then the second leg was a blur – it's still the match people stop me in the street to talk about. We won 5-1 and I scored one [above] and set up two. Tottenham supporters have said they'll never forget that thrashing of the Gunners. We all went out that night to celebrate reaching the final at Wembley. Dimitar Berbatov came over to me saying, 'Mate, what the hell was that about? What a crazy performance'. Coming from him, that meant a lot."

England 2-1 Switzerland

February 6, 2008
Friendly

"I'm torn between picking my England debut and my England goal. The debut was crazy: it was against Australia at Upton Park, Sven-Goran Eriksson sent out a completely different side for the second half, and I assisted a goal for Franny Jeffers and was named man of the match. I'll never forget that day, it was amazing. But when we're playing in the park as kids, we all dream about scoring goals at Wembley for England, and to get a goal against Switzerland was a very special moment. I actually ended up having a lot of regrets with England. I think many of us did: it just didn't quite happen, and most of my team-mates during that era would say the same. I'm massively proud to have represented my nation 21 times, but standout performances were lacking."

Interview Mark White

B&Q has teamed up with Jenas as part of the B&Q Energy Savers initiative that shows just how easy it is to save energy at home, whilst supporting community spaces across the country. Visit diy.com/energy-saving for details

THE ULTIMATE QUIZ

Try our latest football puzzlers out for size, including wolf-fighting managers, Garibaldis and the Fla-Flu derby

01 What age was Eddie Howe (right) when, having had to retire as a player through injury, he took over as Bournemouth gaffer?

02 Which Premier League legend is known as 'The Non-Flying Dutchman' because of his fear of air travel?

03 In what year did Liverpool recruit Peter Crouch, Swansea leave the Vetch Field and Paul Gascoigne become Kettering boss?

04 Croatia captain Luka Modric and former Australia striker Mark Viduka are cousins: true or false?

05 The Fla-Flu derby is contested between which two arch rivals in Rio de Janeiro?

06 AFC Wimbledon were founded in which year: 2000, 2002 or 2004?

07 The Blaugrana colours, the Senyera flag and the cross of St George all feature on which European giant's badge?

08 Which of Gareth Bale, Cristiano Ronaldo and Toni Kroos haven't won a European Cup final for Real Madrid in their own nation?

09 Leigh Sports Village is the home ground of which Women's Super League outfit?





11 'The Garibaldi' is one of the nicknames associated with which Midlands-based Premier League team?

12 Who is the only winner of the Ballon d'Or to hail from Denmark, after starring for Borussia Monchengladbach?

13 Which former Premier League manager once labelled a journalist an ostrich and allegedly fought a wolf pack on a hiking trip?

14 Which Asian country declared a national holiday after winning their opening game of the 2022 World Cup?

15 Which trophy did Pep Guardiola win first as Manchester City boss: Premier League, FA Cup or League Cup?

16 Juan Roman Riquelme and Lionel Messi have which of the following in common: a grandfather, a hometown or a birthday?

17 Luton Town (left) are a Premier League club after an incredible four promotions in 10 seasons. Which player has risen all the way up from non-league with the Hatters?

18 The words 'Arte Et Labore' ('By Skill and Hard Work' in Latin) adorn the crest of which Football League side?









10

These four players all share their surnames with former British prime ministers. Who are they?

1. 31 **2.** Dennis Bergkamp **3.** 2005 **4.** True **5.** Flamengo, Fluminense **6.** 2002 **7.** Barcelona **8.** Toni Kroos **9.** Manchester United **10.** Ben Thatcher, Finidi George, Ben Johnson, Geoff Cameron
11. Nottingham Forest **12.** Allan Simonsen **13.** Nigel Pearson **14.** Saudi Arabia **15.** League Cup (2018) **16.** Birthday (June 24) **17.** Pelle Ruddock Mpanzu **18.** Blackburn Rovers

JULES BREACH

OPINION

The journalist is tipping England to go far at the Women's World Cup...



More than 400 England caps. That's what will be missing from this Women's World Cup compared to last year's triumphant Lionesses team.

Captain Leah Williamson, Euro 2022 Golden Boot winner Beth Mead and elite talent Fran Kirby are injured, while legends Jill Scott and Ellen White have retired. It's a lot of experience to lose ahead of a major tournament. However, it hasn't made the nation doubt that Sarina Wiegman can lead England to glory again, just 12 months on from lifting their first trophy.

It's impossible to replace the likes of Williamson, Kirby and Scott, but Wiegman has still put together a squad with versatility, depth, quality, and a mixture of youth and tournament know-how.

There are six players who have never been to a tournament before – Katie Zelem, Esme Morgan, Laura Coombs, Katie Robinson and Chelsea duo Niamh Charles and Lauren James – and what they lack in experience should be countered with their hunger to impress on the biggest stage.

James, in particular, is a player that can dazzle and excite, and she adds something different to the team from last year. There won't be many sides competing in Australia and New Zealand who have a player with James' X-factor. It could be the summer that her rising star goes global.

It is a different squad from the Euros, but England's forward line is still scarily good. This season's WSL top scorer, Rachel Daly, played at left-back last summer, but after her exploits up front for Aston Villa this season, Wiegman has selected her as a forward.

Beth England has earned her place back for the first time since September after a smart move to Spurs in January, where she netted 12 goals in 12 games. She didn't feature at the Euros, and Wiegman has acknowledged her resilience – a key quality if England are to go deep. Alessia Russo, Chloe Kelly and Ella Toone have all had brilliant seasons and now have a chance to take on even bigger roles.

To balance out some of the youthful exuberance, Lucy Bronze and Millie Bright both passed fitness tests to make the squad and their experience will be vital. Bright will relish captaining the team in Williamson's absence – she has done it before under Wiegman – and her leadership will be key, especially for the group's younger players.

As well as the talent on the pitch, England have one of the best managers in the game. A proven tournament winner with England and her native Netherlands, Wiegman will be the driving force behind the team again. Leading the Lionesses to victory at the Euros, and more recently on penalties at the Finalissima, she's strong and set in her methods, and has proved she can motivate players to believe they can go all the way.

So, as we head into the biggest women's World Cup ever, with 32 countries competing for the first time, we can consider how this has given the women's game the chance to grow even further. Nations like the Republic of Ireland, Haiti, Philippines, Vietnam and Panama have qualified for the first time, earning an opportunity to showcase their talent worldwide.

As holders, the USA will fancy their chances as always, even with a much-changed team, and along with some of the other favourites including Germany, France and joint-hosts Australia, England will have to be at the top of their game, even without some of their most experienced players. The Lionesses are the current queens of Europe, but they're more than capable of finishing this summer as officially the greatest team in the world.



THE END OF BT SPORT SCORE

The final day of this amazing 2022-23 Premier League season also marked the end of *BT Sport Score*.

I remember the very first day as if it was yesterday: walking into the colossal studio at the Olympic Park in east London with very little broadcast experience of that scale, before it became my life every single Saturday for seven years.

It's a unique presenting role and I have loved every minute of it. The completely unscripted nature of following live 3pm matches as they unfold and describing the action as it happens is exhilarating, and the unpredictable nature of it made it so exciting every week.

The number of people that play a part in making those programmes come to life is incredible, and I'm so proud to have been a part of *BT Sport Score* from the beginning through to the very last show.

LAUREN JAMES CAN DAZZLE; THIS COULD BE THE SUMMER HER RISING STAR GOES GLOBAL



MY FOOTBALL

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

The Who frontman on rediscovering his love of football through Arsenal and performing at Highbury's farewell



ROGER DALTREY
ARSENAL

What was the first football match you ever saw live?
It was at QPR – I lived about 500 yards from the ground. I used to go there and I loved it, but I went off football for a while when the band took over. At the end of the 1960s, I witnessed some really terrible violence when the Suedeheads came in. After that, I walked away from the game – the last match I watched was actually the 1966 World Cup Final – because I felt at the time that if the FA didn't get to grips with it [hooliganism], then football would be finished.

How did you end up becoming an Arsenal fan?
It was about 1987: I was picking up my son from school, he got in with his mate, and there was this bloody red and white scarf. I thought, 'S**t, a [Manchester] United fan – not another one...' I asked him what team it was and he told me, "It's the Arsenal". I thought, 'That's OK, that'll do – I'm a Londoner'. From then on, that was it, every weekend. I fell in love with Highbury. We bought a couple of season tickets and it was a golden period of football for Arsenal, starting with the George Graham years. The chant in the stands was "1-0 to the Arsenal". George got us there; the defence that [Arsene] Wenger inherited was like a brick s**thouse, and he then built the midfield and attack. I would say to people, "This is the greatest football you're ever going to see" and, sure enough, I was proved right. We haven't been there since, but we looked bloody good last season!

Who's your favourite player right now?
Bukayo Saka [right] is an absolute dream out wide, Martin Odegaard is a master controller and Oleksandr Zinchenko is a star player too. I hate to pick one player because what I love about Arsenal is that it's a team. The lads are playing as a unit. I love Kieran Tierney – he was out injured a lot during last season but he's a top player. It was great to see Scotland beating Spain. I was really happy about that.

Which player do you like even though they never played for your club?
I like Jack Grealish – he's a very clever player – but I don't like the way he falls over. Sooner or later, referees are going to get pissed off and not give him anything, but it's a fine art, I must say.

Which players have come to see The Who in concert?
The only one I know of was Juan Mata in Manchester. He was delightful: a very articulate, interesting guy and a solid player.

Do you talk to any other musicians about football?
Robert Plant is a good mate and I do send the occasional text. I'd like to see Wolves do better because they deserve to – they were playing so well about three years ago. They seem held up halfway down the table. I didn't keep up with them last season, as I couldn't take my eyes off the top spot!

You're also friends with Noel and Liam Gallagher, right?
I don't ever discuss football with them – that might lead to fisticuffs. They're both brilliant lads and have been great in support of the charity I work with [Teenage Cancer Trust]. They've been terrific supporters. I was kind of disappointed that we lost to [Manchester] City at home in February because we had most of the ball – they went on to win but we were the better team in that match. I read City's body language and I'm not sure the players are completely in love with each other. You can always tell that with a team.

Which of your club's former players has the best job now?
When I look at pundits these days, Paul Merson is great at it and Martin Keown is very good as well, so I'd probably go for those two.



How has football transformed since you were a kid?
It's a different game now but it's wonderful, and so exciting to watch. VAR is going to cost someone the Premier League, though. I can see a lawsuit coming soon. You can't celebrate a goal because you don't know if it's actually a f**king goal. This thing of, "Let's have another look because what about that little finger?" – it's a f**king nonsense. If I was a player, I think I'd have a big protest about the offside law. The linesman isn't putting his flag up at the time of the offside because he hangs on to see where the ball ends up. Not giving an offside straight away could cause a player to get seriously injured, and they're playing all of that extra time that they don't need to play; what's the linesman there for?









Top to bottom
Giving Highbury its marching orders in 2006; playing The Valley in 1976; rock legend and Wolves lover Plant; "Hey, stand by me Pep"

"YOU HAVE TO GIVE IT TO TOTTENHAM: THEY'VE GOT A S**T TEAM BUT BY GOD, THAT'S A GREAT GROUND"

What do you like most about going to watch a match?
My son and I have still got season tickets but I'm not keen on the new stadium. One of the problems is that when Arsenal moved away from Highbury, they split up all of the season ticket holders. When you've been going to games together for 25 years, it's like being in a club: nobody can be offended by anything anyone has said; it's a jolly-up and a get-on-with-life situation. Instead of transferring us in blocks to create the same atmosphere at the Emirates, they threw us into seats. I went along for the first few seasons and thought, 'I'm not enjoying this any more – it's a bit like going to work'.

It must have been an emotional day for you, performing your song *Highbury Highs* on the pitch for the ground's final home game in 2006.
I really did worship Highbury, maybe because it was on a burial site. It had that energy you get inside a ground that none of us can figure out but you just know when it's there. There was something about Highbury which made it very special, and I loved it. I wanted to do an old-fashioned football song accompanied by a marching band. When I was a lad, there was always a marching band playing on the pitch at half-time.

What's the most special piece of football memorabilia that you have?
I've got some very old Arsenal newspaper clippings from long ago that were a present.

Where's the greatest place you've ever watched a game?
I usually watch games in bars now; I watch more in America than I do back home. When Arsenal were in the Champions League, it was quite funny because I couldn't get it and every hotel bar had a big screen with sports and was showing basketball or something. It's amazing what $100 does to a barman.

Do you have a favourite away ground?
When you watch on television, some grounds work better than others. You have to give it to Tottenham: they've got a s**t team but by God, they've got a great ground! Now *that* is a football ground – they've done a clever job there. There are microphones, everything is amplified, and it must be an incredible vibe in the stand. It would make a good shopping mall next season!

You played a famous show at Celtic Park in 1976 as part of 'The Who Put The Boot In' tour, with the gigs all at football grounds...
Yes, I remember playing Parkhead in '76 – those shows were all outstanding gigs. The Swansea ground was right next to a prison. That was our last UK tour with Keith [Moon]. How sad is that?

If you could drop yourself into your all-time five-a-side team, who would you be playing alongside?
You wouldn't want me in your team. I'd have Saka and then David Seaman in goal just for the hell of it. I don't know who else, really – it doesn't matter because we're guaranteed to lose with me in the side anyway!
Richard Purden

For more information on 'The Who Hits Back!' UK tour this summer, head to thewho.com

INTERVIEW

LEE CARSLEY

The ex-Everton midfielder now manages England Under-21s – he meets *FFT* ahead of the Euros

Interview Sean Cole



What are you hoping to achieve at this summer's European U21s Championship?
Ultimately, we want to try to win it. But, more importantly, we want to go there and perform, which we haven't done in the past. We've gone into tournaments with a lot of expectation and not been able to live up to it. Our past doesn't point to success – we've not won this tournament since 1984 – but it's about making our own history by removing the result and focusing on the performance.

How important do you think it is for young players to experience the unique pressures of tournament football?
I see that as a big part of their development. You're away from home for two or three weeks, playing games you need to win, and you have to perform. You need the mentality to deal with disappointments and recover.

You've managed England Under-21s for almost two years. How do you look at your reign so far, and the team's development?
I've really enjoyed it. I'm happy with where the squad is. It's always evolving, because players are going up to the seniors and we're taking players up from the Under-20s. I don't think we've picked the same team for two matches on the trot, which is the nature of development football. Players have adapted well to what we've been asking them to do, and we've tried to play to their strengths and create an enjoyable environment.

Your predecessor, Aidy Boothroyd, said while in the role, "I know the senior men's job has been called 'the impossible job' but the Under-21s is the utterly impossible job". What do you make of that?
I don't share that view. It is a job with a lot of responsibility. We have to tick a lot of boxes: producing players for the senior team; giving lads good international experience with the teams they face, the travel we do, and the countries we go to; ensuring we give a good account of ourselves on and off the pitch; representing England and the FA in the right way... and we also need to win, which is a big thing when it comes to tournament football.

In your role, how closely do you work with Gareth Southgate?
Gareth and Steve Holland have both been involved in the U21s, so they understand the challenges. They understand the journey of a player and how that fits in. I get support from them, from [FA technical director] John McDermott and from the rest of the coaches. It's a real team effort. I've got a really good relationship with Gareth, Steve and John.

What performance or result has given you the most satisfaction, managing this side?
Probably Andorra away, which might sound strange. We flew into Barcelona, then had a two-hour bus journey through countryside. We were playing on a plastic pitch and it was really hot; we told the players that, mentally, it would be a difficult game. We just couldn't break them down. Then we had a man sent off. Getting a breakaway goal right towards the end of the game was important – Curtis Jones ran through and made the final pass with real care to Emile Smith Rowe, who timed his run perfectly and finished in such a ruthless manner. That moment stood out.

The shortage of young English players featuring regularly in the Premier League is often a topic of discussion. How would you assess the situation?
It's definitely a concern because you haven't got the number of players to choose from that other countries do. It's noticeable when you look at the Czech Republic, Germany and Israel squads [England's group opponents]: they have players getting plenty of minutes







> **"WE'VE NOT WON THIS TOURNAMENT SINCE '84, BUT IT'S ABOUT MAKING OUR OWN HISTORY NOW"**

in their own leagues. From the outside, the frustrating thing is that these players have the quality – they just sometimes don't get the opportunity. It's about having that trust.

What did your own international career as a player mean to you?
Representing the Republic of Ireland was big for me and my family. I had some good experiences. But I don't think I played well for Ireland – honestly, in 40 caps, I probably had three good games. I couldn't replicate my club form at international level. I'm not sure why that was, but I think about it a lot.

You went to the 2002 World Cup but made only a brief substitute appearance. How do you reflect on that whole experience?
It was surreal. I remember the whole team sitting in a hotel in Japan, watching the opening game and realising we were part of a World Cup, but it was a frustrating time because I didn't play as much as I wanted to. If I'd been given the option to go home after a week, I probably would have taken it. Some of the lads had brilliant experiences and I'd like to think I supported them, but I wouldn't put that down as a highlight of my career.

Above Another great strike from Thomas Gravesen **Below left** Emile Smith Rowe scored a vital qualifying goal in... Andorra?

You had a successful six years at Everton, from 2002 to 2008. What enabled the club to consistently punch above its weight during that period?
Definitely the dressing room. We had a real blend of good players who took a lot of pride in not being beaten as individuals and as a team. We took that into every game. David Moyes had a decent reputation, but we didn't know much about him when he first came in from Preston as a young manager. It was the perfect mix of the right manager, at the right time in his career, with the right group.

You saw Wayne Rooney break into the first team at Goodison Park. What made him stand out at such a young age?
People often say young players are going to be world-class, but I saw Wayne at 15 so I know what that looks like! In training, he was knocking over senior players, scoring hat-tricks and just doing ridiculous things. Wayne was outstanding – I couldn't pick out a weakness in his game. Probably the biggest strength he had was his mentality. He always wanted more. I never had the feeling that anything got too much for him, regardless of the fuss that was going on around him and the amount of attention he received. Nothing changed. That was down to the grounding and the support he had.

What do you make of the suggestion that Real Madrid really wanted to sign you in 2005 but ended up buying your midfield partner, Thomas Gravesen, by mistake?
It's a great story, but anyone who believes a rumour like that couldn't have watched us play that season: we look quite similar, but Thomas was so much better at football than me. He could dribble and create chances for others. I was better at the things he wasn't good at, like tackling and tracking runners. The funniest thing about him moving to Real Madrid was seeing him wearing his Everton club suit and tie when he attended his first press conference in Spain!

"THE UTTERLY IMPOSSIBLE JOB"

The words of Carsley's predecessor – but how did the last three England U21s managers fare? It's not all bad...



AIDY BOOTHROYD
2016-2021

The former Watford gaffer came up from the U20s and won at Toulon in 2018 after a semi-final at Euro 2017. Then came group exits in 2019 and 2021, laments about losing his stars to the seniors, tactical criticism and, inevitably, the exit for 'Hoofroyd'.



GARETH SOUTHGATE
2013-2016

Four years on from overseeing Middlesbrough's Premier League relegation, Southgate took over the England U21s. He led them to the final of Euro 2015 and Toulon glory a year later, before a pint of wine hastened his ascent to the big job.



STUART PEARCE
2007-2013

Psycho's record 63-match reign did end with three defeats at Euro 2013, but making the 2009 final was a feat given the mismatch in that 4-0 loss – Messrs Neuer, Boateng, Hummels, Khedira and Özil all in Germany's XI; Scott Loach in goal for England.



353 SPINE LINE: "'R, R, R, R, R, R, R, R, R, R, R, R, L' are the feet penalties were taken with in the 1998 play-off final, ending in Michael Gray's miss'," says Stuart Court. Correct! Cracked the Spine Line? To win an Art Of Football A4 print or T-shirt, email *fourfourtwo@futurenet.com* or enter on Twitter using #FFTSpineLine



WEIRD WORLD OF FOOTBALL

MEANWHILE IN...

...MLS, the trees at Matthew McConaughey's local club are big – and very, very, angry

If *FFT* knows anything about footballers, it's that nothing scares them quite like a giant anthropomorphic tree.

Austin supporters put that to the test when they entertained Toronto in MLS, unveiling a huge tifo of Marvel character Groot, a sentient, tree-like creature from space. Are there trees in space? Probably not, though that's a question far too deep and complex for a page about odd stuff happening in football.

Either way, the tifo fitted the Texan club's identity to a tree. In honour of the 500-year-old Treaty Oak in Austin, the club call themselves The Oaks or even El Tree, an extraordinarily dubious play on words based on the nickname of the Mexican national team, El Tri.

Austin are also owned by Two Oak Ventures, a consortium that includes world-famous actor Matthew McConaughey. He's a regular at games and once even rocked up on the pitch to play the bongos, because he's Matthew McConaughey.

The franchise only joined MLS in 2021, but finished second in the 2022 Western Conference. This year they've slipped back to mid-table, although the horrid tifo did its job, petrifying visitors Toronto into a 1-0 defeat.

If one single tree was enough to put them off, imagine how frightened they'd be if they had to face Nottingham Forest.



GET THAT SCOOTER!

Pitch invasions are getting ever weirder. If a child on a bicycle wasn't enough, a club president has now stormed the playing surface on a mobility scooter.

Finland was the scene for the first intervention. In one of the more adorable pitch invasions, a toddler rode across the field during a Suomen Cup match, halting play so he could wave to his uncle, who was playing.

In Italy, Lecco's veteran chief hobbled on to the pitch with a walking stick after a penalty was given against his side in a Serie C play-off with Pordenone – it wasn't overturned, so he got his scooter and drove around the grass for a bit. It's his pitch, and he'll do what he wants...

- A Venezuelan top-flight fixture between Deportivo La Guaira and Deportivo Tachira had to be halted for several minutes after bees swarmed around the pitch.

- At half-time of Sion's 5-0 loss to Servette, club president Christian Constantin burst into the dressing room and angrily subbed four players, including Mario Balotelli. Why always him?

- Forget the Champions League – Arsenal will be in the Europa Conference League in 2023-24. Montenegro's Arsenal Tivat have qualified for a first go at Europe.

BYE ZLATAN, HI ZAVA

Zlatan Ibrahimovic has called it a day (for now), but AFC Richmond's Zava came out of retirement in the final episode of *Ted Lasso* – as announced by *FourFourTwo*. During the show, Zlatan-alike Zava was shown on a fake *FFT* cover, which we created specially in collaboration with Jason Sudeikis, who plays Lasso. "Striker heads to LAFC," it said, as he followed Zlatan to the city of angels... and avocado toast.





THE DEBATE

Should football use a 'stop clock' when the ball goes dead?



YES

RYAN DABBS
STAFF WRITER
@ryandabbs_



NO

CONOR POPE
DIGITAL EDITOR
@ConorPope

"With the ball currently being in play for less than 60 minutes in an average Premier League match, and occasionally even as few as 45, then introducing a stop clock and reducing 45-minute halves to 30-minute halves ensures, plain and simply, that more football is played. And what's not to love about that?

"As an international futsal player myself with Northern Ireland, playing a sport which does utilise a stop-clock, my experience leaves me feeling that football is missing a trick by choosing to dismiss any notion of accurate timekeeping. In a world where goal-line technology, VAR and stats dominate the footballing landscape, we still rely on a referee to shrug his shoulders at the end of a half and guess, 'That's four minutes stoppage time... I think'.

"Inevitably, this just leads to derision. Officials are hounded by players, coaches and fans for playing too much or too little stoppage time, depending on a person's allegiance. Stopping the clock every time the ball goes dead, therefore, makes it black and white: if two minutes remain on the clock, then two minutes remain.

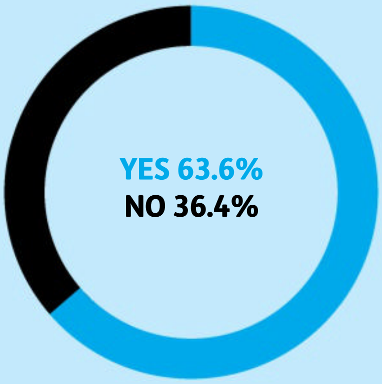
"As we witnessed at the 2022 World Cup, adding on 15 minutes to a half diminishes the spectacle somewhat. People get bored and everything becomes a bit flat. Making every single ball-in-play second count ultimately improves the show.

"Stopped clocks certainly don't diminish the intensity of a game, either. Teams leading in the final minutes of matches are forced to play football rather than adopt dark arts to run time down and gain an advantage. With no time to waste, players won't feign injuries in the final minutes of matches, because there's barely any benefit to them doing so.

"Finally, think of the thrill of a buzzer-beater goal. Scoring in the literal last second of a game would be an unrivalled feeling, even better than notching in injury time now. Goals would become even more iconic – Michael Jordan-esque in their delivery as victory is snatched from the jaws of defeat."

THE RESULTS ARE IN

Social view via @FourFourTwo followers on Twitter



"A stop clock would get rid of time-wasting only by definition. The irritation fans feel when a throw-in is taking too long isn't really because they might be deprived of watching this exact number of seconds of football being played in half an hour's time – it's because watching people standing around doing nothing is boring.

"That's the problem. Removing yellow cards for time-wasting, and replacing them with a stop clock, will only encourage time-wasting. But if you stop the clock every time the ball goes out of play, then it no longer makes sense to make time-wasting an offence.

"The advantage that you can get from stopping a game will still exist. Disrupting the flow of your opponent can give you a tactical edge in a match. This already accounts for most of the time-wasting you see. When a goalkeeper is taking forever with a goal-kick in the last 10 minutes, they're running down the clock. When they're doing it before that, they're trying to prevent the other team from building any sort of rhythm.

"American football, which does use a stop clock, is essentially a set-piece sport. The expectation is that there will be long periods in which players are preparing for the next burst of action and recovering from the previous one. This is a fundamental difference to football, where the onus should be on getting the ball back into play quickly, rather than fussing over the specifics of the total amount of time that is played.

"There are two alternative solutions. One is to ensure time actually is added on at the end of a game, as we saw at last winter's men's World Cup. That still comes with a significant flaw: eight minutes lumped on to the greatest World Cup final of all time is grand, but seeing a board flash up that amount of time after 90 minutes of a drab Tuesday night draw in February is a different matter entirely.

"The other solution is even simpler. Actually apply the rules and hand out more yellow cards for time-wasting."



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NOW FOR THE WORLD

After bagging their first ever major trophy at the Euros, England's women want to conquer the globe. Alessia Russo, Georgia Stanway and Alex Greenwood explain to *FourFourTwo* why a place in this summer's World Cup final isn't just a dream...

Words Chris Evans
Photography Unmarked Agency



England's top female footballers don't like tidying hotel rooms. Such is their aversion to clearing up their belongings, in fact, it's become a point of principle not to do it.

But the Lionesses aren't simply a hotelier's nightmare – the informal no-pack rule grew into one of the key psychological tricks that inspired them to European Championship glory on home soil last year, during a lengthy stay at The Lensbury in south-west London. It's sure to be in use again this summer at Queensland's Novotel Sunshine Coast Resort, as England attempt to win the World Cup in Australia and New Zealand. After all, why bother packing if they don't intend to leave? ▸



"That was something we really enjoyed doing: not packing our suitcases, leaving our stuff exactly where it was," Georgia Stanway tells *FFT*, a smile cracking across her face at this small act of rebellion. "It was never really spoken about, but for every matchday minus one, we would travel to a different hotel, and it became tradition to leave everything unpacked at our base hotel.

"It was where all of our clothes were and where everything was unpacked. We had made the rooms our own and made it the Lionesses' hotel, and there was always a bit of, 'Are we taking our bags?' But it became normal to leave them because we knew we were coming back. That meant we were coming back to the hotel for the final."

It may seem to be but a minor detail in a campaign that brought England's women the first major trophy in their history, but the confidence conveyed in such an act speaks volumes about the bubble of positivity that manager Sarina Wiegman has created around her team. At first, it was leaving their rooms unpacked; then it was proving on the pitch that this was more than a superficial gesture, by going all the way to the final.

In major tournaments, when the finest of margins can dictate whether a team progresses or crashes out, having that inner belief can provide the extra push to get over the line. "Over the course of the 10 years I've played with England, we have definitely changed mentality-wise more than ability-wise," defender Alex Greenwood tells *FFT*. "I think the ability has always been there – we've always had enough top-level players to compete with the world's best teams – but I don't know if the mentality or the ruthlessness were there.

"Sarina has changed so many things about England and how we approach things, the direction we want to head in, the language that we use... that clarity for every player to think as a footballer can be difficult to find sometimes. When you've got it, everything takes care of itself."



"THE DYNAMIC HAS CHANGED, WITH RETIREMENTS AND INJURIES, BUT OUR SQUAD IS UNBELIEVABLE"

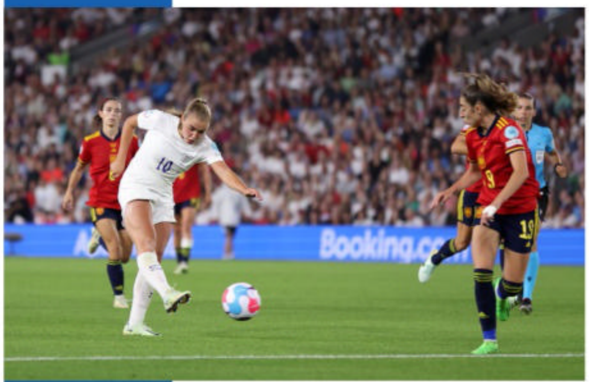
ABSENT FRIENDS

But while the Lionesses have been preparing to head Down Under as one of the favourites to win the World Cup, the focus briefly shifted towards the players who weren't packing their cases to leave England at all.

A spate of injuries to high-profile stars hasn't done them any favours before they even touch down in Australia on July 7, ahead of their opening group game against Haiti in Brisbane on July 22. Among those watching from home will be captain Leah Williamson and Chelsea creator-in-chief Fran Kirby, while Euros player of the tournament Beth Mead missed out on the squad despite showing a better-than-expected recovery from an ACL injury she suffered in November.

Throw in the retirements of Jill Scott and Ellen White following last summer's success and there's a significant shift in the identity of the team from only 12 months ago. It has prompted some questions over a possible dearth of leadership in the squad. There were

Below Stanway had to pull out something a bit special to beat Spain last year **Bottom** Another trophy triumph at Wembley with the Finalissima, but skipper Leah Williamson (left) won't be going to the World Cup





calls for Manchester City's Steph Houghton to be brought back in from the cold, even though the former England captain hadn't been selected since 2021. In the end, the 35-year-old didn't make the squad, either.

"I look at England now and I'm looking for the leaders, because Ellen White and Jill Scott are not going to be there and they played massive roles behind the scenes, not just on the pitch," says BT Sport pundit Lucy Ward, the former Leeds and Doncaster Belles forward who has been covering the Lionesses since 2005. "Leah Williamson not being there is massive and Beth Mead isn't there, either. You need to look at leaders, and I would have said that Steph Houghton needed to be back in that squad because Wiegman needs leaders; she needs people who have been in that situation and know exactly how to act. Houghton is the epitome of professionalism and I don't see many other centre-halves at England level with the experience, along with the ability.

"Injuries and how they cope with them will play a decisive part in whoever wins – USA, Australia, anyone. I think England have just got a little problem over proven leaders with experience in the squad."

The absences will allow some of England's other leading lights to take centre stage. Given the talent and experience that remains within the squad's ranks – Lucy Bronze, stand-in skipper Millie Bright, Keira Walsh and Alessia Russo, to name just four – there's plenty to suggest those gaps can be filled, on and off the pitch.

Another player who is expected to step up is Stanway. After forcing her way into the side shortly before last year's Euros kicked off, she made one of the three midfield berths her own and scored the pivotal extra-time winner against Spain in the quarter-finals with a stunning 20-yard strike. Since then, the 24-year-old has moved to Bayern Munich and played a key role in helping her new team to win the Frauen-Bundesliga crown, with nine goal involvements in 21 league matches.







Above Key unity under Wiegman **Below** Bronze wins gold, again **Bottom** Millie Bright is captain for the summer

"There are going to be people who have to step out to take a leadership role and have to lead by example, whether that's in their performance or in communication, or just fighting for things in terms of our environment," says Stanway.

"The dynamic has changed, with the people who have retired and the people who have picked up injuries, but we're still an unbelievable squad. Everybody plays at the highest level and everybody is having a really good season. It's a tournament where we have got to do our best, and we've got to enjoy every single moment of it, on and off the field. Hopefully, things will lead by the way we've progressed and the way we're able to stick to the process.

"People can talk as much as they want, write things on social media and jump to their conclusions, but when we're in the environment, we don't feel it because we don't let it in, and that's the greatest thing. Whatever's in, stays in, and whatever's out, stays out. We know the focus is on the players and staff that are in the room."

For Russo – likely to be one of the stars who needs to fire if England are to get their hands on another trophy – the challenge to improve would always have been there regardless of any absentees.

"I'll always want to push myself as a player," the 24-year-old forward tells *FFT*. "You want to better yourself each year and, having never been to a World Cup before, I hope it will be an incredible summer. Unfortunately, people do get injured and that's tough to see, but the game goes on. Injuries happen in football and you just have to deal with it; other people have to step up. It's time for people to hit the ground running and be ready for the tournament.

"There have been changes to the squad, but England is such a talented country with the teams and players we have – and the league this season has been high-quality. I have confidence in whoever gets selected to go out and put their best foot forward."

"WE THINK SHE'S A GENIUS"

If there's one person who can coax those performances out of the squad, it's surely Wiegman. The Dutch head coach won the European Championship with her own nation in 2017 and arrived in England with a big reputation, but very few people outside of the Lionesses setup expected her to oversee such a transformation of the team's fortunes so quickly.

The team Wiegman inherited when she took the reins in September 2021 hadn't shown too many signs of what was to come. Her appointment to replace Phil Neville had been announced more than a year earlier, although the FA had to be patient while she saw out her Oranje contract.

Neville lost seven of his final 11 matches in charge, representing the Lionesses' worst run of form since 2003. Interim boss Hege Riise – now managing her home country of Norway – oversaw a 6-0 friendly win over Northern Ireland in her first match in charge, but followed it up with defeats to France and Canada as the team continued to falter.

Wiegman, on the other hand, hit the ground running. Six victories in her opening ▸



"THE BEST TEAMS ARE ABLE TO WIN AND WIN AGAIN. WE NEED TO KEEP EXPRESSING OURSELVES"

six games in World Cup qualifying – featuring 53 goals, which included a record-breaking 20-0 romp against Latvia – was a good start, followed by victory in 2022's Arnold Clark Cup as hosts taking on Canada, Germany and Spain. An unbeaten run that would continue throughout the Euros had been set in motion.

"Honestly, I don't know how she does it – we think she's a genius," Beth Mead told *FFT* in an interview given a few months after the Euros success. "She has such an effect on you as a person and a team. She's direct, you know where you stand, you know your responsibilities and the way we play as a team. Throughout the Euros, she kept us humble and out of the limelight; she kept us in our family bubble of the team and made us feel so calm, even though everyone else was so pumped and excited.

"There was such expectation, but she kept us calm – even in the changing room before the final, she said we didn't have to win, but we really wanted to and we should approach it like just another game of football."

At the heart of Wiegman's approach is her ability to bring the squad even closer together, creating a bond that empowers players to be themselves on England duty. The idea is to promote the feeling of positive mental health, where every player is valued and knows their role even if they aren't in the starting XI, and feels in an environment where high performance comes naturally.

Flanked by her long-time assistant Arjan Veurink and the FA's head of women's psychology, Kate Hays, Wiegman aimed to shut out external pressures and remove as much ambiguity as possible from the job at hand. Clarity was the order of the day, just as it had been during her successful spell in charge of the Netherlands.

"I spoke to Shanice van de Sanden about Wiegman when we knew she was going to be appointed," Manchester City's Greenwood explains, recalling a conversation with her former Liverpool team-mate. "The first thing Shanice told me was that you'll know where you stand as a player, whether you like it or not. Sarina is infectious and it was clear from day one what we were going to get."

After a long run of underwhelming results, a reset was just what the players needed. While much of the Lionesses squad had known each other for years, going back to the basics of their relationships meant Wiegman could quickly rebuild the side in her own image. Meetings were arranged for the group to take stock of their team-mates, with the players then encouraged to share compliments and tell one another what they bring to the team. In other sessions, players were asked to confide in one another about previously difficult experiences and share uncomfortable stories they hadn't revealed before. The conversations weren't designed to be a one-time thing, but rather a gateway to deeper, more open relationships that brought everybody closer together.

"One of the biggest things we did," says Stanway, "was this getting-to-know-you exercise where we picked a person and went for a walk with them, and found out about

their journey – how they ended up here today, what makes them tick and the reasons they do what they do. That was really important for us, because we got to know everyone on a more personal level, rather than just a football level.

"When you're playing for opposition teams, it can create a lot of competition and friction at times. So, coming into the Lionesses environment, we knew we were here to play for England and were able to know each other on a more personal level, to be able to communicate more easily."

Watch or listen to any clips of England's players together in the past year and the interactions ooze that feeling of closeness. Everyone clearly enjoys being part of the squad. Wiegman's utopia is alive and well.

"With Sarina," continues Greenwood, "it's about her personality traits and how she allows players to be themselves; to express themselves on the pitch and be the type of person they'd be within their own four walls at home. It's an environment where you feel comfortable. If you've got that feeling like you're at home when you go and play football, you're not constantly looking over your shoulder or having insecurities.

"Everything is black and white. It's clear how it's going to be and how we're going to play, then we have freedom within that. The way we have found clarity as individuals and as a team is probably the biggest reason why we've been so successful."

BECOMING A TEAM TO FEAR

A good example of that sense of freedom was Alessia Russo's goal against Sweden in the Euros semi-final, which was later named as the tournament's best goal and earned a place on FIFA's Puskas Award shortlist.

Leading 2-0, midway through the second half, the Lionesses were surging forward for a third goal to kill the contest when Fran Kirby teed up Russo in the centre of the penalty area. The striker's first effort was hit straight at Swedish goalkeeper Hedvig Lindahl, but in a flash of blonde hair, Russo got to the rebound, bounced off a defender's challenge and flicked a backheel towards goal, her quick thinking flummoxing Lindahl as the ball trickled through her legs into the net. It was a moment of ingenuity that could only come from a player full of confidence.

"I think every player will say that Sarina let us play with freedom and we were able to express ourselves," says Russo. "It wasn't necessarily said, but you felt it in the camp. It was an environment where everyone was firing. It was just a really positive place to be in and train, so when you went out for the game, you felt free.

"That goal against Sweden was a moment of instinct and it was something I felt comfortable enough to do. It's great when you have players who feel really confident in a tournament – it pays off."

The plan worked last summer, but don't be fooled into thinking there's no flexibility. The comeback victory against Spain in the quarter-finals showed that when the going gets tough, this England side have the tools to overcome adversity.

La Roja took the lead and dominated possession, but whereas England sides of the past would have buckled and lost, the current vintage didn't let the fear of defeat consume them. The players spoke after the match about feeling a sense of calm and adapting to the various challenges that the match threw at them, with defender Millie Bright even being used as an auxiliary striker as the Lionesses chased the game.

Every major tournament winner has to overcome hardship somewhere along the way, and it bodes well for England that late goals – including one from Bright's boot in the Arnold Clark Cup decider against Germany in February 2022 – have featured throughout the team's recent success. Once again, the credit is laid at Wiegman's feet.

"Because of what she did with the Netherlands, she's got herself in a position where she is very comfortable with what she's all about and isn't a coach who is thinking she has anything to prove," says Ward. "She is very unlike an FA coach. She will throw Millie Bright up front if it means winning a game. It's not how the FA works but because she won, she can get away with a lot. Sarina isn't bothered what it looks like; she just wants to get it done. It's worked. She shows composure, but she's ruthless."

The feelgood atmosphere surrounding the Lionesses didn't stop with the Euros triumph. They rounded off 2022 with two more World Cup qualifying victories to finish their group with a 100 per cent record, before beating World Cup holders USA 2-1 in a landmark friendly win. Another Arnold Clark Cup, again on home soil, was added to their collection at the start of this year as England scored 12 goals in three matches. Then, in April, they came out on top against Copa America Feminina champions Brazil to lift the inaugural Women's Finalissima at Wembley.

Victory against the Selecao was another stake in the ground for England's World Cup credentials, not just because of the quality of the opposition, but due to the nature of the win. Ella Toone's first-half goal was cancelled out by Andressa for Brazil in the 93rd minute, forcing a penalty shootout, and while Toone was then the first to miss her spot-kick, her team-mates turned it around to win 4-3.

That resolve and ability to handle adversity hasn't gone unnoticed among the perennial World Cup challengers. Word on the street is, they think the Lionesses are the real deal.

"That's the most difficult thing: there's a new pressure now," says Ward. "The USA are outwardly saying that England are one of their biggest rivals for the World Cup, and that's never happened to us before. The USA ▸

ENGLAND'S WORLD CUP RECORD



1995
QUARTER-FINALS

After failing to reach the first World Cup in 1991 – losing to Germany 6-1 on aggregate saw to that – England eased through their group with wins over Canada and Nigeria four years later. Then they ran into Germany again and lost 3-0 in the Swedish city of Vasteras, in front of only 2,317 fans.



2007
QUARTER-FINALS

The Lionesses didn't qualify in 1999 (bottom of a four-team qualifying group) nor 2003 (lost a play-off to France) but returned in China, drew with Japan and Germany, then put six past Argentina to reach the knockouts. They fell 3-0 to the USA while players slated the FA for paying them just £40 a day.



2011
QUARTER-FINALS

England didn't lose a game at the 2011 tournament in Germany: Hope Powell's side beat New Zealand and Japan to win their group, setting up a last-eight clash with France. Jill Scott (above) put England in front but an 88th-minute leveller thwarted them, before France prevailed on penalties.



2015
THIRD PLACE

England progressed from their group in Canada, then sealed their first World Cup knockout win with Lucy Bronze's belter against Norway. They beat the hosts but lost the semi-final to Japan in agonising fashion: an own goal in the final seconds of stoppage time. At least they beat Germany to finish third.



2019
FOURTH PLACE

Phil Neville's team became the first England side to win all three group games at a World Cup, then beat Cameroon and Norway 3-0 apiece in the knockouts. The USA's Alex Morgan and her tea-sipping celebration denied England in the semi-final, as did Sweden in the third-place play-off.



"ENGLAND ALWAYS HAVE A TARGET ON THEIR BACKS. THE PRESSURE WAS THERE EVEN BEFORE WE WON THE EUROS LAST YEAR"

used to pat us on the head and say, 'Aren't you doing well?' But now that we've beaten them at Wembley, they are recognising us as clear contenders, which is quite unusual."

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

That recognition brings a new pressure. Yet Russo says that handling the weight of expectation is something the players carry every time they pull on an England shirt.

"I think England have always had pressure on them going into tournaments, whether it's men or women," she tells *FFT*. "England always have a target on their backs. Although we've won the Euros now, I think the pressure was there before we had even won a trophy. I don't think it's anything us as players are going to fear; it's something that comes with being an England team."

It's a fair assessment. However, England will face a different type of atmosphere this summer, compared to last. Playing a home European Championship naturally brought a special attention, but the fans packing stadiums across the country were desperate to show their support for the Lionesses, so any pre-tournament tensions could quickly be turned into positive momentum.

Mead described the Euros opener against Austria as "our most nervous game" and

WHO NEEDS PHIL NEVILLE?

Sarina Wiegman's 31 matches in charge have produced 138 goals... and one defeat

Opponent	Result
North Macedonia (H)	**W** 8-0
Luxembourg (A)	**W** 10-0
Northern Ireland (H)	**W** 4-0
Latvia (A)	**W** 10-0
Austria (H)	**W** 1-0
Latvia (H)	**W** 20-0
Canada (H)	**D** 1-1
Spain (H)	**D** 0-0
Germany (H)	**W** 3-1
North Macedonia (A)	**W** 10-0
Northern Ireland (A)	**W** 5-0
Belgium (H)	**W** 3-0
Netherlands (H)	**W** 5-1
Switzerland (A)	**W** 4-0
Austria (H)	**W** 1-0
Norway (H)	**W** 8-0
Northern Ireland (H)	**W** 5-0
Spain (H)	**W** 2-1
Sweden (H)	**W** 4-0
Germany (H)	**W** 2-1
Austria (A)	**W** 2-0
Luxembourg (H)	**W** 10-0
USA (H)	**W** 2-1
Czech Republic (H)	**D** 0-0
Japan (N)	**W** 4-0
Norway (N)	**D** 1-1
South Korea (H)	**W** 4-0
Italy (H)	**W** 2-1
Belgium (H)	**W** 6-1
Brazil (H)	**W** 1-1 (4-2p)
Australia (H)	**L** 0-2

spoke of how her goal in the 1-0 win sparked a feelgood factor that the team has been enjoying ever since. This year, stadiums won't be teeming with fervent England fans to ease any anxiety, so the players have to find a way to bottle the energy that has served them so well and then unleash it on the other side of the globe.

"Of course having your fans there provides momentum," admits Greenwood. "They're on your side, and more or less the whole stadium is with us. We get that it's not going to be the same this summer, albeit there are a lot of English people in Australia and I'm sure we will have a lot of support. It's not a home Euros. We have to fly halfway around the world and prepare very differently to how we did in London or Manchester. But that's taken care of and we're very well prepared.

"We've also got players now who play in different countries and play week in, week out, against different opposition. So, we're in a very different place to where we have been previously."

If adjusting to a tournament a long way from English shores, after playing 14 of their last 17 internationals on home soil, is one hurdle that the Lionesses will have to jump, then so is dealing with defeat. An unbeaten run spanning Wiegman's first 30 matches in charge finally came to an end in April, when a lacklustre England lost 2-0 to Australia in a friendly a few days after the Finalissima. It was also the first time under Wiegman that England had conceded twice in a match.

Yet the defeat could have come at the perfect time, five months before the World Cup. It provides an opportunity for Wiegman and her coaching team to take a closer look at the possible vulnerabilities their rivals may target during the tournament.

"After every game, we have a review and talk about the things we do really well and the things we have to improve and do better for the next game," Wiegman said in an interview for BT Sport and EE's New Signing initiative. "When you keep winning, there isn't that urgency. Now, with losing to Australia, when we didn't have our best game, we have the urgency because we lost. That's a great lesson for us and provides the urgency to make us take the next step."

"WHEN YOU WIN, YOU WANT TO WIN MORE"

Ensuring her charges maintain the hunger that they showed to win the Euros is another challenge that Wiegman faces. Countless international managers in the past have lamented the inability to repeat success, and given how much publicity the victory has brought to the Lionesses stars in the past year, staying focused between tournaments would be a triumph of mental fortitude.

There's little sign of this crop of players losing their edge, though, regardless of the defeat to Australia. The turnaround of some key players due to retirement and injury has led to new names – such as Chelsea's Lauren James, sister of Reece – refreshing the side and its outlook. The will to win remains.

"If anything, winning has lit the fire even more – I know it has for me," insists Russo. "When you win one trophy, it makes you want to win some more. It will be tough and I think the competition in women's football has never been higher, but that's what you want: to be on the biggest stage and competing against the world's best. I think it's going to be a really exciting summer."

First of all, the Lionesses must negotiate a diverse group comprising Haiti, Denmark and China, before they enter the labyrinth of the knockout phase, where frightening opponents are around every turn.

If England progress, their opponents in the last 16 are likely to be either Australia – the co-hosts and England's recent conquerors – or Canada, with Brazil or beaten European finalists Germany expected to be next up in the quarter-finals. The pre-competition rhetoric may be focused on whether Wiegman's side can repeat the trick and win for a second consecutive summer, but the path to glory looks far from straightforward.

"We've just got to take it one step at a time," says Stanway. "This is the first time we're going into a tournament as this group of players and probably the first time we're playing three different playing styles within the group stage.

"It's just about putting one foot ahead of the other. We've got a good process before the tournament to make sure we're in good condition, then we've got a good plan to beat the jetlag and for communicating with our families because the time zones are different, and then being able to ask for what we need to be at our best.

"The most important thing is taking it a step at a time. That's what we did at the Euros – not getting too far ahead of ourselves but making sure we're focused on the next game before focusing on the one after that."

Winning was always an unspoken ambition before they got their hands on the European Championship trophy last year, but it is an inevitable talking point since breaking their tournament duck. Raising the profile of the women's game has been an eternal aim for Lionesses teams since they first took to the field in an official international match in 1972, but the barometer of achievement now appears to have shifted. So, what does success look like this summer?

"The obvious answer that people want us to say is to win the World Cup," Greenwood tells *FFT*. "But every team is going to New Zealand and Australia to win the World Cup and we're no different to them.

"It's about taking our game to another level. We need to keep expressing ourselves, putting women's football on the map, making it bigger and better, and making our country proud. We want to keep inspiring young females, to be successful on the pitch, and to play a style of football that we value.

"I believe that you're talked about when you're successful, and the best teams are able to win and win and win again – but not everything is going to go smoothly because there are other nations that want to do the same thing as us. But we always want to be a positive story and have positive outcomes."

The rest of the world – and Antipodean hotel staff – beware.

Read about England's opponents on page 41





Below *"FIFA, did you see that?!"* **Bottom** Last year's European champions have set their sights on global glory

WOMEN'S WORLD CUP 2023

Your team-by-team guide to the other 31 participants, from favourites to outsiders and *eight* nations on debut

Words Richard Laverty, Jessy Parker Humphreys

GROUP A

NORWAY

The Grasshoppers are looking to bounce back from a humbling Euro 2022 in England, which ended in the group stage after a devastating 8-0 defeat to the hosts.

Hege Riise (right), the Norway legend and one-time Lionesses head coach, is now at the helm. After picking up form at the end of last year, however, it's been a difficult 2023 so far, losing to both Sweden and Denmark.

As Norway's most-capped player with 188 appearances, and one of only three players to win the World Cup, Euros and an Olympic gold medal, she has the pedigree to pick her team up off the collective floor. For the talent at their disposal, especially in attack, Norway have disappointed for a while now, failing to reach the last four in any major tournament since they made it to the final of Euro 2013.

Talismanic Lyon striker Ada Hegerberg is still returning to her best after lengthy injury lay-offs, but lessening the burden on her are stellar wingers in Caroline Graham Hansen and Guro Reiten, of Barcelona and Chelsea respectively. Arsenal's Frida Maanum is also impressing of late, while exciting youngsters include Manchester City's Julie Blakstad and Brighton's Elisabeth Terland, both 21. And, if Hegerberg doesn't fire, then Emilie Haavi has been enjoying a career resurgence at Roma, performing consistently well for the new Serie A champions. In short, Norway have no excuses for a repeat of last summer.

A young backline leaves Riise still looking to find defensive balance without square pegs in round holes, which cost them last summer. But, with a kind draw and plenty of firepower, this tournament offers Norway a prime chance to get things back on track.

WORLD CUP RECORD Norway went all the way in 1995 and lifted the trophy, with Riise one of their standout players. Most recently, in 2019, they made it to the quarter-finals but bowed out after a 3-0 defeat to England.





NEW ZEALAND

Things don't look too promising for the co-hosts, heading into the biggest summer the women's team has ever had. Even with former USA Under-20s coach Jitka Klimkova in charge, New Zealand have gone 10 games without a win and lost seven of their last eight, including 5-0 to Portugal, who only qualified themselves via the play-offs.

Still, the draw does offer some hope of progression. They'll be relying on a passionate home crowd, as well as the experience and quality of Ali Riley and Hannah Wilkinson (above left).

WORLD CUP RECORD In five attempts, the Football Ferns have yet to win at the World Cup – drawing three games and losing 12 – and they scored just a solitary goal four years ago in France.



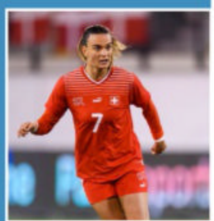
PHILIPPINES

The Asian archipelago is one of eight nations making their World Cup debut in 2023, and they are among the most intriguing teams at this tournament.

Under former Australia head coach Alen Stajcic (left), they have plunged all of their resources into the team from the top down, recruiting players who qualify for the Philippines from far and wide, largely in the American college system. Only this season have they created under-20 and under-17 teams.

For now, those youth sides are also coached by Stajcic and his assistant, Nahuel Arrarte. The focus is on the first team, thanks to Filipino businessman Jefferson Cheng, the team manager sponsoring and funding the outfit.

WORLD CUP RECORD This is their first, qualifying as Asian Cup semi-finalists.



SWITZERLAND

The Swiss have reached the last two European Championships, only to exit in the group stage of both. Germany legend Inka Grings now leads La Nati but they are winless in their five games since qualifying for the World Cup via a home play-off, having squeezed past Wales in the last minute of extra time.

As hosts of Euro 2025, Switzerland need a positive tournament to show that women's football in the country is going the right way. Eyes will be on the likes of Ramona Bachmann and Lia Walti, but there's also some exciting young talent in the shape of Riola Xhemaili (above left) and Svenja Fölmli.

WORLD CUP RECORD In Switzerland's only previous World Cup, Canada 2015, they lost 1-0 to the hosts after making the last 16 by thrashing Ecuador 10-1.



GROUP B

AUSTRALIA

Even before considering home advantage, the Matildas are one of 2023's form teams.

Swedish head coach Tony Gustavsson knows how to win a World Cup, having been Jill Ellis' assistant for the USA's triumphs in both 2015 and 2019, and after a slow start, Australia are playing how he wants them to play. April's 2-0 win in England, ending the European champions' 30-match unbeaten streak under Sarina Wiegman, was their biggest statement of intent yet, following up on wins against Sweden – a 4-0 thumping – and Spain during the previous six months.

Australia have now won eight of their last nine matches, with Chelsea's Sam Kerr at the heart of things and Arsenal's Caitlin Foord also in great form for her country. The pair could forge a formidable partnership with the roar of a home crowd behind them. Such is their support, Australia's opener against the Republic of Ireland has been upgraded from the 45,000-capacity football stadium in Sydney to the nearby Stadium Australia, the 83,500-seater venue that will host the final.

Gustavsson, one of the most dynamic, innovative and well-respected coaches in the game, is blending defensive solidity with flowing attacks; goals with clean sheets; and youth with experience. The 21-year-old pair of defender Charlotte Grant and midfielder Kyra Cooney-Cross have been particularly impressive, while goalkeeper Lydia Williams and fellow thirtysomethings Tameka Yallop, Clare Polkinghorne and Katrina Gorry have been there and done that, and continue to hold down the fort as Australia's backbone.

WORLD CUP RECORD Three quarter-finals represent their best returns, peaking in 2015 when it took an 87th-minute Japan goal to deny the Aussies a semi-final. In 2019 they lost to Norway on penalties in the last 16.

BEATING ENGLAND TO END THEIR 30-GAME UNBEATEN RUN WAS A STATEMENT OF INTENT FROM AUSTRALIA



REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

There's plenty to be positive about as the Girls in Green head into their first World Cup. Experienced Dutch boss Vera Pauw has been the guiding light as they won their last three World Cup group-stage qualifiers before beating Scotland in a play-off at Hampden Park.

Nor have they let up since, recording a 4-0 win over Morocco, a solid draw with China and a pair of commendably narrow defeats in the USA, away to the world's best team. Manchester United's Aoife Mannion (above) has been a key addition at the back, and Katie McCabe and Denise O'Sullivan offer quality further forward, so there's a lot to like.

WORLD CUP RECORD This will be the Republic of Ireland's first appearance at a major tournament.



NIGERIA

The Super Falcons have been World Cup ever-presents since it began in 1991, yet they've reached the knockouts only twice. It will be tough this time around, too, in poor form and a tricky group.

Although three wins after six straight defeats do offer some hope, they've not found a rhythm under American coach Randy Waldrum, even with so much attacking talent in Barcelona's Asisat Oshoala, Atletico Madrid's blue-haired Rasheedat Ajibade and, from the NWSL, Ifeoma Onumonu and Uchenna Kanu. Look out for 22-year-old Chiamaka Nnadozie (above left), one of the most promising shot-stoppers in the world.

WORLD CUP RECORD Advancing to the last 16 in 2019 ended a run of four group-stage eliminations, but Nigeria's only quarter-final was back in 1999.



CANADA

The Olympic champions have been through a turbulent time, fighting for more support from their federation. It hasn't been going too well on the pitch, either, with four defeats in their last five games – one of Canada's worst runs in years, albeit against good opposition.

The gold medal they picked up in Tokyo two years ago remains, however, a reminder of their quality. They took a step forward under English coach Bev Priestman and she's still on the scene, as is Christine Sinclair, the 39-year-old veteran with a record 190 international goals and a barely-believable 323 caps. Joining Chelsea's Jessie Fleming in the next generation of talent is Julio Grosso (above) and Jordyn Huitema, both 22.

WORLD CUP RECORD Surprisingly, their best finish is a single semi-final in 2003.

GROUP C

SPAIN

La Roja are one of the stories of this World Cup, as Jorge Vilda has continued to move forward without the 15 players who spoke out against the conditions of the national team – including many of Barcelona's dominant domestic side.

Experienced defender Irene Paredes is now back in the fold, but question marks have remained beside the names of Patri Guijarro, Aitana Bonmati, Mapi Leon and many more, including double Ballon d'Or winner Alexia Putellas, who has returned from injury. While there have been suggestions that they may still return before the tournament, will Vilda call on them? The head coach has lost the support of many fans but has defiantly batted away questions about resignations, and his team have been in pretty good form without the absent players.

Nevertheless, the situation doesn't reflect well on the Spanish federation. These should be the golden years for their women's team. At club level, Barcelona have reached four of the last five Champions League finals; in the Spanish national side, however, controversy and infighting dominate headlines.

Still, Spain have won nine of their 11 games since bowing out of last summer's Euros in the last 16, losing in extra time to the hosts and eventual winners, having originally led. A defeat to Australia is the only blot on their copybook – they've beaten Norway and even the USA, world champions. Levante forward Alba Redondo has come to the fore, as has Real Madrid's Esther Gonzalez (below).

The depth in Spain's ranks is what keeps them in World Cup contention. Following a few successful years at youth level, players are emerging into the first team: Athenea del Castillo has gone from strength to strength after a breakout 2022, and Salma Paralluelo, Eva Navarro, Fiamma Benitez, Paula Tomas, Jana Fernandez and Olga Carmona – each of them aged 18 to 22 – have been beneficiaries of the current situation.

WORLD CUP RECORD Amazingly, Spain had never qualified for a World Cup until 2015, and that ended in a group-stage exit. They went one better in 2019 and pushed the USA hard in the last 16, but they'll be aiming for even more this summer.



HEAD COACH JORGE VILDA HAS CONTINUED TO MOVE FORWARD WITHOUT THE 15 PLAYERS WHO MUTINIED



JAPAN

It's hard to know what to make of Japan. World champions 12 years ago and then finalists in 2015, the team subsequently lost their way and results have been mixed under Futoshi Ikeda.

Their possession-based style of play is always easy on the eye, though, and they have plenty of star quality: Hia Sugita excels in midfield, while exciting young forward Maika Hamano (left) signed for Chelsea in January, joining Mana Iwabuchi – who played in Japan's 2011 World Cup Final win as a teenager – and Yui Hasegawa at English clubs.

WORLD CUP RECORD They shocked the US to win the 2011 tournament on penalties, before the Americans took revenge four years later. In 2019, they fell to the Netherlands in the last 16.



ZAMBIA

The Copper Queens burst onto the international scene during the Tokyo Olympics and are following that up with a first World Cup appearance. Bruce Mwape's charges still have a lot of work to do, mind, as was shown in April's back-to-back 5-0, 5-2 stuffings to South Korea – they'll need to shore up defensively to stand any chance of taking points off Spain and Japan.

Their strengths lie in attack, with Barbra Banda banging in goals and Madrid CFF's in-form duo of Racheal Kundananji (above left) and Grace Chanda completing a front three that could cause anyone a few problems.

WORLD CUP RECORD Zambia are another debutant, though as one of Africa's most improved nations, they will hope to excite on the big stage.

COSTA RICA

Las Ticas are one of a record number of six CONCACAF participants at the 2023 World Cup. Two had to make it through the play-offs, but Costa Rica qualified with a confident performance in last summer's CONCACAF Championship.

Still under the guidance of Amelia Valverde, now approaching a decade in charge, they do pose a threat. Raquel Rodriguez and 37-year-old captain Shirley Cruz (inset, centre) offer quality and experience in the middle alongside Glasgow City star Priscila Chinchilla, 21. Yet they're struggling to take the next step forward, and a 4-0 loss to Scotland – extending their run to 14 games with one just win – has hardly helped morale.

WORLD CUP RECORD This is the Central American nation's second World Cup; in 2015, they exited at the group stage.

GROUP D

DENMARK

Drawn into England's group, the Danes will want to atone for a disappointing Euro 2022: though Lars Sondergaard's team were part of a tough quartet with Germany, Spain and Finland, a first-round exit was still well short of expectations.

This is their first World Cup since 2007, but they won't be pushovers. Denmark reached the Euro 2017 Final, losing an exciting tie to the Netherlands, and their non-qualification for the 2019 World Cup was partly down to a dispute with their federation.

One player England will know to be wary of is Pernille Harder. Once the world-record signing in women's football, the 30-year-old ex-Chelsea ace – now Bayern Munich-bound – missed a sizeable chunk of 2022-23 due to surgery following a hamstring problem. The good news for the Danes, and bad news for the Lionesses, is that she's back in top form, setting up Sam Kerr's FA Cup final clincher.

It's less clear whether Nadia Nadim will be at the World Cup. The striker had also been in a race against time to play at Euro 2022 after tearing an ACL – she did make the squad but was unable to have the impact she would have liked – and then she tore an ACL again in September, this time in her left knee, before suffering a personal tragedy in November.

It's worth keeping an eye on Kathrine Kuhl. As one of the world's most highly-rated teenagers, she has previously been described as being better than Harder was at the same age, with astounding technical skill. Moving to Arsenal in January showed a readiness to step into the limelight at club level; Denmark hope she can do the same internationally.

WORLD CUP RECORD Impressively, they have featured in two quarter-finals (in 1991 and 1995) despite winning only three games across their four World Cup appearances.

ENGLAND WILL KNOW TO BE WARY OF EX-CHELSEA ACE HARDER, BACK IN TOP FORM AFTER INJURY

ENGLAND'S FIXTURES

July 22, Brisbane
Haiti (10.30am)

July 28, Sydney
Denmark (9.30am)

August 1, Adelaide
China (12pm)

ENGLAND'S RECORD VS OPPONENTS

Denmark
P 17 **W** 8 **D** 3 **L** 6

China
P 5 **W** 1 **D** 1 **L** 3

Haiti
No previous games





CHINA

Formerly one of the giants of women's football, China have slipped down the rankings as other nations caught up by investing in their female programmes.

If recent results are to go by, they may struggle to escape Group D. China haven't beaten another national team since seeing off Chinese Taipei last year, though they did record friendly wins over Real Betis and Sporting de Huelva.

Racing Louisville forward Wang Shuang (above), once of PSG, will likely be their biggest threat. Last year, she and Wang Shanshan scored five goals apiece in China's Asian Cup triumph.

WORLD CUP RECORD China have been at seven of the eight previous editions, losing the 1999 final on penalties to the US hosts and never yet going out in the group stage. Will that change this year?

HAITI

The Caribbean nation are making their World Cup debut, having successfully negotiated the inter-confederation play-offs in February by sinking Senegal 4-0 in Auckland and then stunning higher-ranked Chile just four days later.

All eyes are on 19-year-old midfielder Melchie Dumornay, who scored both of Haiti's goals in that monumental 2-1 win. She has also attracted attention for her performances with Reims – so much so, the race for her signature was won by Lyon, French champions in 16 of the last 17 campaigns, and she will now be joining them on July 1.

If Haiti are to produce another upset Down Under, Dumornay (inset, left) will likely have something to do with it.

WORLD CUP RECORD This is their first, following that shock success over Chile.

GROUP E

USA

The Stars and Stripes will head across to Australia and New Zealand looking to become the first team, male or female, to win three consecutive World Cups. And they'll be the favourites to do so, despite being less than convincing of late.

True, the USA have actually won their last eight internationals, and most countries would happily accept such 'poor' form. But the manner of some of those victories at home to unfancied opponents, combined with three straight defeats to England, Spain and Germany at the end of 2022, have led to questions being asked of Vlatko Andonovski.

The Macedonia-born manager experienced a disappointing first tournament at the US helm, losing to Canada in the semis of the Olympics. Though they did depart Tokyo with a bronze medal, it was felt that he over-relied on older players instead of giving younger ones an opportunity to prove themselves.

And so, while legends such as Alex Morgan and Megan Rapinoe are still likely to be called up, the past year has seen a new wave of youngsters come through. Portland Thorns' Sophia Smith, the No.1 draft pick in 2020, became the youngest ever MVP in the NWSL last season; Washington Spirit's Trinity Rodman, the No.2 draft pick in 2021 and daughter of basketball legend Dennis, became the highest-paid player in NWSL history with her contract extension in 2022; and the No.1 draft pick in 2023, 18-year-old Alyssa Thompson, has impressed in her first professional season, scoring a goal just 11 minutes into her NWSL debut. She picked up her maiden international caps in October.

One notable blow is the injury to Mallory Swanson, who'd notched seven goals in six appearances for her country in 2023 before tearing her left patella tendon, ruling her out

THE US HAVE WON HALF OF ALL WORLD CUPS TO DATE, AND FINISHED SECOND OR THIRD IN THE OTHER HALF

of the World Cup. But Julie Ertz's return has boosted a midfield that has recently been a problem area; the 31-year-old played every minute of the USA's 2015 World Cup success and was named US player of the year in 2019 as they won the competition again – she had not featured since the Olympics, missing 18 months due to injury and childbirth.

Andonovski hopes that his 2023 World Cup squad can be the perfect blend of youth and experience. Rapinoe could win her 200th cap at the tournament, joining captain Becky Sauerbraunn and likely squadmate Morgan in reaching that milestone, while defenders Naomi Girma and Tierna Davidson will aim to show that they can be the team's future.

Even with some uncertainty around this team, there's no doubt that their historic pedigree and talent pool makes the USA justifiable favourites. However, they may just have lost their fear factor. Losing to England and Germany aided the confidence of their potential rivals, and a tough group-stage fixture against the Netherlands – a repeat of the 2019 World Cup Final – could ratchet up the pressure early in the tournament.

WORLD CUP RECORD The most successful women's team in history have won half of all World Cups (1991, 1999, 2015 and 2019) and been second or third in the other half. Solid.



NETHERLANDS

In their second group game, the Dutch will have to face the side who beat them in the last World Cup final, in Lyon in 2019.

A lot has changed since that defeat to the USA four years ago. The Netherlands were managed then by Sarina Wiegman, who had guided them to European glory in 2017; she took the England job in 2021 and an English coach took to the empty stage she had left behind, but didn't convince in the role. Mark Parsons faced player discontent almost from the get-go and was gone within a year, the defending champions exiting Euro 2022 at the quarter-final stage after losing to France.

The KNVB replaced Parsons with Andries Jonker, who was the Netherlands women's interim coach for eight matches in 2001. He has a varied CV, working as Louis van Gaal's assistant at Bayern Munich before spending four years running Arsenal's academy. His task here will be that much harder without star striker Vivianne Miedema, who suffered an ACL injury in December; her footballing ability and leadership makes the three-time Ballon d'Or nominee a significant absentee.

Fortunately, the Netherlands boast one of the most gifted batches of youngsters in world football right now. Ajax striker Romée Leuchter will have her eye on the vacant No.9 role, and Victoria Pelova has shone at Arsenal either on the right wing or centrally. Teenager Esmee Brugts is also in demand, with both Manchester clubs reportedly mulling bids.

Euro 2022 suggested that the Dutch have also solved one of their long-term issues: goalkeeping. Daphne van Domselaar won only her second cap when she replaced the injured Sari van Veenendaal early in their opening match, then went on to be one of the team's star players. Van Veenendaal subsequently retired, having struggled for some time to compete at the highest level, and this World Cup is Van Domselaar's first tournament test as the established No.1.

WORLD CUP RECORD The Oranje finished as runners-up in 2019 despite having made their World Cup bow only four years earlier.

> **THEIR TASK WILL BE THAT MUCH HARDER WITHOUT VIVIANNE MIEDEMA, WHO SUFFERED AN ACL INJURY**





PORTUGAL

Portugal will make their first World Cup appearance having twice participated in the European Championship. They earned a bit of a reputation for drama during Euro 2022, drawing 2-2 with the Swiss and losing 3-2 to the Dutch; a 5-0 stuffing by Sweden provided a downer ending, but given that they were in the tournament only as a result of Russia's exclusion, they certainly put on a show.

Portuguese women's football in general has garnered attention recently, with Benfica turning a few heads in the Champions League group stage. Their 20-year-old attacking midfielder, Kika Nazareth (above), was Jorge Mendes' first female client and could shine here.

WORLD CUP RECORD Edging past Cameroon in the inter-confederation play-offs earned them a first go at it.

VIETNAM

Another World Cup debutant, Vietnam took an unusual route to qualification. Reaching the knockouts of the Asian Cup for the first time in their history – by drawing 2-2 with Myanmar following 3-0 defeats to South Korea and Japan – put them into a three-team round robin play-off for a World Cup berth. When their opponents, Thailand and Chinese Taipei, saw their squads decimated by COVID-19, Vietnam won both matches.

This could be a tough group for a side whose most recent result against top opposition was a 7-0 gubbing by France, who led 6-0 at half-time. Vietnam's opening group match is against the US, who set a World Cup record in 2019 by firing 13 goals past Thailand and may attempt to rack up double figures again.

WORLD CUP RECORD None to speak of.

GROUP F

FRANCE

It wouldn't be a World Cup finals without a France team in turmoil, although they do seem to have assuaged at least some of their internal strife with the appointment of Herve Renard.

The new France coach will be competing in his second World Cup in less than a year, having led Saudi Arabia to a shock win over eventual champions Argentina at the men's tournament in Qatar – a far cry from his brief spell managing Cambridge United in 2004.

Renard (below) came into the role after Corinne Diacre finally lost her job following long-term discontent from the squad about her managerial methods. The 48-year-old had already expelled a number of players from the national team, but the final straw came when captain Wendie Renard, star striker Marie-Antoinette Katoto and talented winger Kadidiatou Diani all announced that they would no longer play for her.

The new boss hasn't had long to unite the group, but early signs have been good. Disregarded Lyon players such as Eugenie Le Sommer have been reintegrated, and the Renard era began with confidence-boosting wins against Colombia and Canada.

Given that Lyon have won the Champions League in six of the last eight seasons, it has long been suggested that France's squad is more talented than they have shown on an international stage. Full-back Selma Bacha, still only 22, was one of the standout players in Lyon's 2022 Champions League Final triumph over Barcelona. At PSG, meanwhile, 23-year-old Sandy Baltimore is among the most naturally gifted wide players around.

However, taliswoman Katoto will not be fit in time for the World Cup. The 24-year-old ruptured an ACL in France's second group game at Euro 2022 and has been sidelined ever since – a significant blow for a forward who averages close to a goal per game for PSG and France alike. Lyon attacker Delphine Cascarino is also out after injuring an ACL.

WORLD CUP RECORD Les Bleues have got to the quarter-finals in each of the past three World Cups, and came fourth in 2011, but they were disappointed to lose 2-1 to the USA in the last eight of a tournament on home soil in 2019.



LYON'S CHAMPIONS LEAGUE DOMINANCE SUGGESTS LES BLEUES HAVE MORE TALENT THAN THEY HAVE SHOWN

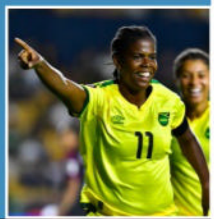


BRAZIL

Brazil have been in mixed form in 2023. Managed by Swedish ex-USA coach Pia Sundhage (left) – the first foreigner since 1925 to lead either of Brazil's senior international sides in competitive football – O Selecao disappointed at the SheBelieves Cup but pushed England to a penalty shootout in the Finalissima at Wembley, then beat Germany 2-1.

Marta's injury forced them to play those games without their all-time top scorer. Brazil are hoping she can regain fitness in time for the World Cup, where they have a tough group: they've never beaten France in 11 encounters, and lost to them in the last 16 in 2019.

WORLD CUP RECORD Finalists in 2007, Brazil have made it to the knockout rounds at every World Cup since 1999.



JAMAICA

When you think of Jamaica, you think of Bunny Shaw. The 26-year-old striker (left) has been scoring for fun in the WSL at Manchester City, plundering 20 goals in 2022-23, and with 55 in 38 international appearances, she's a safe bet to do the same at the World Cup.

The Jamaican national team hasn't always had a lot of support – indeed, Bob Marley's daughter, Cedella, had to fund the team's resurrection in 2014 and continued to raise money so that they could attend events – but this qualification for a second World Cup is a historic feat for Jamaican football. The men's team have reached the tournament only once, back in 1998.

WORLD CUP RECORD The Reggae Girlz lost all three group-stage games at their first ever World Cup in 2019.

PANAMA

Panama will be making their debut at the 2023 World Cup. Finishing third in their group at the 2022 CONCACAF Championship entitled Las Canaleras to participate in the inter-confederation play-offs, where they duly beat Papua New Guinea and Paraguay. It was a redemption of some sorts: in 2019, Panama lost to Argentina at the same stage, 5-1 on aggregate, and waved goodbye to their World Cup dream – but, as it turned out, not for very long.

They have few players from the major leagues, but US-born Riley Tanner, of Washington Spirit, made her debut in the play-offs and had an immediate impact. Lineth Cedeno (above left) and Marta Cox will also be key, having scored vital goals in qualification.

WORLD CUP RECORD It all starts here.



GROUP G

SWEDEN

Is 2023 going to be the final bang of the drum for rock-loving Peter Gerhardsson? The 63-year-old is now in his sixth year of a successful spell as the head of Sweden's national team, but there's a perception that this could be the last chance for many of the nation's 'Golden Generation'.

With Sofia Jakobsson, Olivia Schough, Caroline Seger, Kosovare Asllani and Linda Sembrant all aged between 32 and 38, time is ticking for a talented group of players hoping to show that last summer's run to the Euro 2022 semi-finals wasn't the end, but the beginning of a new dawn where their experience melds with exciting young talent.

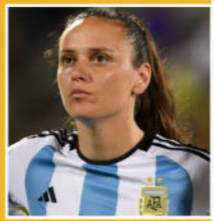
Gerhardsson is a steady hand at the wheel and Sweden have always enjoyed a good mix of defensive talent and attacking quality. The fitness of some main players is a concern, not least defender Hanna Glas, but Magdalena Eriksson & Co hold down a resolute backline.

And there's plenty to be positive about, in Everton's Hanna Bennison and Hammarby's Matilda Vinberg, both 20. Madelen Janogy is back in the frame after a good spell alongside Vinberg in the Damallsvenskan. The form of Stina Blackstenius will delight Gerhardsson most of all: the forward joined Arsenal last year and has been finding the net regularly.

Sweden may just lack the overall quality to go all the way, but their solidity makes them well built for tournament football, as seen in 2019's third-place finish after beating Phil Neville's Lionesses. That they're still ranked third in the world – above England – shows their consistency over the years, but they're a big group of players itching to go a round further, and they may not get another shot.

WORLD CUP RECORD It's the magic number: they've finished third three times. Sweden did reach the 2003 final, but lost to the US hosts.

STINA BLACKSTENIUS HAS BEEN FINDING THE BACK OF THE NET REGULARLY SINCE HER SWITCH TO ARSENAL



ARGENTINA

Albeit a long way from emulating the men's success in Qatar, Argentina's women are back on the up. Last year featured a semi-final exit from the Copa America and ended with a heavy 7-0 loss to Spain, but La Albiceleste are unbeaten in 2023, winning four in five.

They have ability. Pivotal players such as Yamila Rodriguez have made the step to the more competitive Brazilian league, while Estefania Banini and Florencia Bonsegundo (above) are stars of Liga F in Spain. Sole Jaimes, once of Lyon, is their biggest threat in attack.

WORLD CUP RECORD Argentina are at their fourth World Cup and seeking their first win. Having lost all six group games across 2003 and 2007, shipping 33 goals, they did draw twice in 2019.



ITALY

At least one Italian side can qualify for World Cups – the men's team may have missed the last two tournaments but the women appeared in the 2019 quarter-finals, offering hope for 2023.

Historically they've lagged behind the men, failing to reach the semi-finals of any tournament since Euro 97. Last summer, they were knocked out of the European Championship after bagging one point. But Serie A is improving and the squad is almost entirely based in that division – they can boast attacking firepower in Cristiana Girelli of Juventus (above left), Roma's Valentina Giacinti and Milan's Martina Piemonte, three of the league's top scorers in 2022-23.

WORLD CUP RECORD Despite making it to only three of eight previous editions, they've been in the quarter-finals twice.



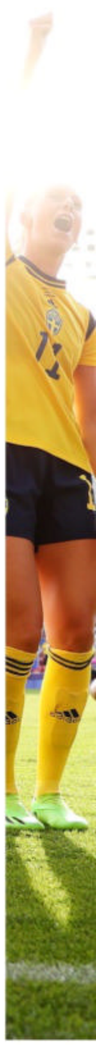
SOUTH AFRICA

The Banyana Banyana head into the tournament after finally getting the better of their rivals to win a Women's Africa Cup of Nations crown, beating Morocco 2-1 in last year's showpiece.

Desiree Ellis (left), a former Spurs midfielder and manager, has worked wonders and doesn't get anywhere near the recognition she deserves, while key players are now branching out and developing in better leagues – Refiloe Jane is a veteran of Serie A and Linda Motlhalo has won the Scottish title with Glasgow City. Keep an eye on talented forward Jermaine Seopsenwe, who is doing good things in Mexico.

WORLD CUP RECORD This is just South Africa's second World Cup; in 2019 they lost all three games in a tough group featuring Spain, Germany and China.





GROUP H

GERMANY

World champions in 2003 and 2007 but runners-up at Euro 2022, Germany are keen to add another trophy to the cabinet.

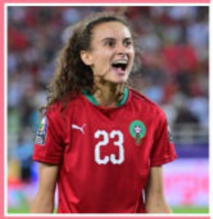
They have previously been the dominant European force in women's football, and though the rise of England, the Netherlands and Sweden has called that into question, an impressive performance at last year's Euros was a reminder of the talent at their disposal.

Under manager Martina Voss-Tecklenberg – who herself played in three World Cups for Germany – the DFB-Frauen lost to Sweden in the 2019 quarter-finals, but before that they had won all four of their games to nil. Using several younger players at that World Cup also means that key members of the current squad have experience. Lena Oberdorf, Klara Buhl and Giulia Gwinn were all given minutes as teenagers; four years later, Oberdorf and Buhl are automatic starters and Gwinn will play if she recovers from an ACL tear in time.

One of Germany's real strengths is their goalkeeping situation. Wolfsburg's Merle Frohms and Chelsea's Ann-Katrin Berger are two of the world's best stoppers, resulting in Mala Grohs remaining uncapped despite being Bayern Munich's first choice this year. However, the defence ahead of them has seemed somewhat shaky: Germany have suffered from a shortage of in-form centre-backs and Voss-Tecklenberg has been forced to play a midfielder there in 22-year-old Sjoeke Nusken, who has just joined Chelsea from Eintracht Frankfurt.

If Germany do progress through the tournament – and their group-stage draw must be the envy of several other Pot 1 sides – then we could be set for a Euro 2022 Final rerun, with England potentially poised to meet them at the quarter-final stage. There will be no repeat of Sydney Lohmann and Jill Scott's famous verbal sparring match, sadly – Scott retired from football soon afterwards, and received a message from Lohmann to mark the occasion. "Good luck with your retirement, you f**king prick," the German said, jokingly echoing Scott's words to her during the heat of battle at Wembley.

WORLD CUP RECORD In a word: consistent. The two-time champions have reached the quarter-finals at least in all eight World Cups.





THE QUARTER-FINALS MAY BRING A REPEAT OF THE EURO 2022 FINAL BETWEEN GERMANY AND ENGLAND

MOROCCO

Morocco have already created history by qualifying for their first World Cup. Getting to the last four of the Africa Cup of Nations on home soil last year was enough to secure their passage to this summer's event, but they didn't stop there: a shootout win over defending champions Nigeria made Morocco the first North African and first Arab nation to reach the final, with Reading-born Tottenham forward Rosella Ayane (above) converting the decisive penalty.

Though they went on to lose the final to South Africa, Morocco have shown that they have just as much pluck and grit as their men's team, who got to the semis of the 2022 World Cup in Qatar.

WORLD CUP RECORD This is their first appearance on the global stage.

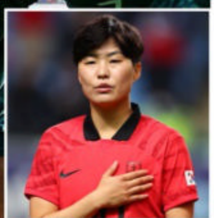


COLOMBIA

Colombia qualified for the World Cup with an impressive performance at last year's Copa America Femenina, where they made the final as hosts before narrowly losing 1-0 to Brazil.

The spotlight at this summer's jamboree will be fixed on 18-year-old Linda Caicedo (left), who notched the winner in the Copa America semi-final against Argentina and was also the joint-top scorer and Silver Ball winner at last year's Under-17 World Cup in India, as Colombia advanced to a final against Spain. Reportedly subject to approaches from Barcelona, Lyon and Chelsea, Caicedo finally opted to sign for Real Madrid in February this year.

WORLD CUP RECORD Las Cafeteras got as far as the last 16 in 2015, but then failed to qualify four years later.



SOUTH KOREA

South Korea achieved their best ever finish at the 2022 Asian Cup in order to qualify for this World Cup, reaching the final after recording a shock 1-0 victory against Australia in the quarter-finals.

The scorer that January day was the talismanic Ji So-yun (left), the creative midfielder who spent eight years at Chelsea as the driving force behind a dozen trophy wins before returning to play in South Korea at the end of last season. As her country's all-time top scorer, caps-holder and seven-time player of the year, she's their best hope.

WORLD CUP RECORD Unspectacular. Having lost all three group games on their 2003 debut, they missed the next two tournaments but went through to the last 16 in 2015. They lost all three group matches once again in 2019.

THE LIONESSES' ROUTE TO WORLD CUP GLORY

We've crunched the numbers and calculated how the cards will be dealt Down Under this summer, based on the pre-tournament odds. England fans might want to set up camp in Sydney – are the bookies ever wrong...?

GROUP A	GROUP B	GROUP C	GROUP D	GROUP E	GROUP F	GROUP G	GROUP H
NORWAY (Q)	AUSTRALIA (Q)	SPAIN (Q)	ENGLAND (Q)	USA (Q)	FRANCE (Q)	SWEDEN (Q)	GERMANY (Q)
NEW ZEALAND (Q)	CANADA (Q)	JAPAN (Q)	DENMARK (Q)	NETHERLANDS (Q)	BRAZIL (Q)	ITALY (Q)	SOUTH KOREA (Q)
SWITZERLAND	REPUBLIC OF IRELAND	COSTA RICA	CHINA	PORTUGAL	JAMAICA	SOUTH AFRICA	COLOMBIA
PHILIPPINES	NIGERIA	ZAMBIA	HAITI	VIETNAM	PANAMA	ARGENTINA	MOROCCO

LAST 16

• AUCKLAND •
NORWAY vs JAPAN

• SYDNEY •
USA vs ITALY

• WELLINGTON •
SPAIN vs NEW ZEALAND

• MELBOURNE •
SWEDEN vs NETHERLANDS

• SYDNEY •
AUSTRALIA vs DENMARK

• ADELAIDE •
FRANCE vs SOUTH KOREA

• BRISBANE •
ENGLAND vs CANADA

• MELBOURNE •
GERMANY vs BRAZIL

QUARTER-FINALS

• WELLINGTON •
JAPAN vs USA

• AUCKLAND •
SPAIN vs SWEDEN

• BRISBANE •
AUSTRALIA vs FRANCE

• SYDNEY •
ENGLAND vs GERMANY

SEMI-FINALS

• AUCKLAND •
USA vs SPAIN

• SYDNEY •
FRANCE vs ENGLAND

FINAL

• SYDNEY •
USA vs ENGLAND

Based on odds as of June 6, 2023

THE RECORD BREAKER

No footballer, male or female, has ever scored more international goals than Christine Sinclair. At 40 years of age, she's back for her sixth World Cup with Canada and aiming to nudge her tally ever closer to 200...

Words Richard Laverty

Canada's Christine Sinclair has achieved almost everything. After turning 40 on June 12, she's set to embark on a sixth World Cup and is six goals clear of USA's Abby Wambach as the highest scorer in the history of international football, male or female.

Having found the net a staggering 190 times since her debut for Canada back in 2000, she went into June 68 goals ahead of the men's record holder, Cristiano Ronaldo. She has also scored in five separate World Cups – only Marta and Ronaldo can match that statistic – and will be aiming to make that six this summer.

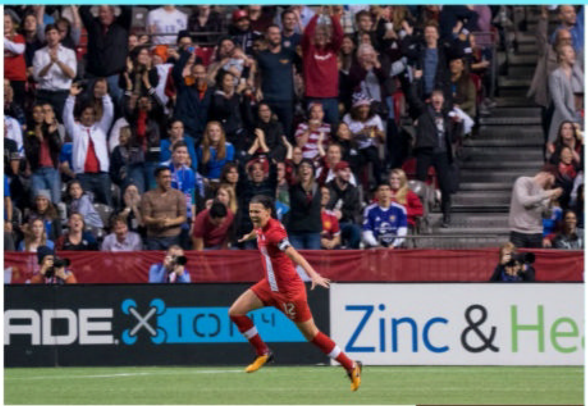
In 2021, Sinclair finally won Olympic gold with Canada, sinking Sweden on penalties in Japan – for her country, she's racked up a whole host of titles over the years, as well as three NWSL Championships with current club Portland Thorns in the USA.

Her personal accolades would make any player jealous. She's been a FIFA World Player of the Year nominee an incredible eight times and was awarded an Outstanding Career Achievement trophy at the Best FIFA Football Awards in 2021. She's won golden boots at the Olympics, clinched the Under-19 World Championship and been named Canada's player of the decade. Back home, she's been her country's player of the year a staggering 14 times, spanning from her debut year in 2000 through to 2018.

There's no other way of putting it, Sinclair is a legend – not just in Canada, but around the world. However, such are the inequalities still existing between the male and female game that her fame levels sadly don't quite match that of men's record holder Ronaldo. With 323 caps, she's now just 31 behind the all-time appearance record held by retired USA star Kristine Lilly, too.

What she has never done, though, is win the World Cup – Canada are 28/1 outsiders to triumph Down Under, but Sinclair isn't giving up on her dream as the side looks to progress past the quarter-finals for only the second time, after their fourth-placed finish in 2003. After all, they defeated the USA at the Olympics, which is giving them hope.

This seems likely to be Sinclair's last World Cup, but don't call it a swansong just yet...



Above Sinclair is aiming to score at a sixth World Cup this summer

Heading into this World Cup, you are the top scorer in international football history and second for caps behind Kristine Lilly. What has been behind that longevity?
Touch wood, I've been lucky enough to have stayed relatively injury-free throughout my career, which certainly helps. Probably most of all, I just love this game. I still love coming to practice every morning, whether it's with my club team Portland Thorns or the national team, going through the grind along with all of my team-mates.

You've scored at five World Cups and won Olympic gold. Has that sunk in yet or is it something you'll review once you retire?
Yeah, I mean, I kind of had my first chance to properly reflect on everything while writing my book *Playing The Long Game*, along with Stephen Brunt. He was able to ask questions that really got me thinking about moments in the past. But overall, I'll have a far greater appreciation for everything after I hang up my boots. I will say the gold was so special – just the journey of winning the two bronze medals, which helped to change the culture and popularity of the sport in Canada, then finally winning the gold was... unbelievable! Pre-tournament, we set out with the mission to change the colour of the medal and we managed it. Hearing the Canadian national anthem being played was unforgettable.

This may be your last World Cup, so how does it feel heading into this tournament?
I didn't say that! [*Laughs*] I'm not sure that it feels any different to past tournaments – I'm just happy to have the opportunity to go out there with my team-mates and win this thing. It'll be great to have my family down in Australia and New Zealand as well.

Both you and Marta could score at your sixth World Cup this summer. What are your targets for this tournament?
My ambitions have always been about doing anything I can to help the team win titles – whether that's scoring goals or being more of a playmaker. Obviously, it'll be really cool if that happens but it's not something I'm thinking about especially. The goal is always to win the tournament and I believe we have a team that can do it. But, for me, it's just been wonderful to witness the growth of the women's game over my career. There's no easy path in this tournament and I wouldn't have it any other way.

How different do you feel as a player now you're 40, compared with the Christine Sinclair of previous finals?
Apart from things hurting a little more post-match, I've just become a smarter player, being able to use my experiences to support my team-mates with reading the game and things like that. On the pitch for both of my teams, I think you would have seen me drop a little lower into the midfield than I played in the past, so I'm able to be involved in the build-up and create opportunities.

THE TOP 10

Christine Sinclair heads a stellar list of women's international goalscorers

Player	Goals
Christine Sinclair (Canada)	190
Abby Wambach (USA)	184
Mia Hamm (USA)	158
Carli Lloyd (USA)	134
Kristine Lilly (USA)	130
Birgit Prinz (Germany)	128
Alex Morgan (USA)	121
Julie Fleeting (Scotland)	116
Marta (Brazil)	115
Maysa Jbarah (Jordan)	113



"FOR ME, IT'S JUST BEEN WONDERFUL TO SEE THE GROWTH OF THE WOMEN'S GAME OVER MY CAREER"

Do you plan to play on beyond the World Cup and chase Lilly's caps record?
You know, I'm not really sure at this stage. I'll focus on the task ahead of me and take things one game at a time. I've always said I'll stop playing the second I don't enjoy it any more, but I'm just not at that point yet. Records are fantastic and, like I said before, something I'll look more fondly upon after I'm done, but foremost I'm concerned with doing what it takes for the national team to have success at this World Cup.

Cristiano Ronaldo holds the record for international goals and caps in the men's game, but your numbers are better. Do you get the recognition you deserve?
Personally, I've just been happy to play the game I love as a job and interact with the brilliant fans we have in Canada and here in Portland, so I couldn't ask for anything more – but, as a whole, there is further to go for women's sport to get the recognition that it deserves. You can't help but think how much more recognition or money our top female players could have if they were male. We've made good strides with things like the NWSL final being on prime-time TV last year, or the tremendous turnouts we saw at Euro 2022. The takeaway is that when the investment is made in women's sport, it results in support from people in the stands or watching on TV.

As a striker who has scored many goals, what tips can you give aspiring forwards?
It's all about putting in the long hours on the training pitch, manipulating the ball in different ways and practising scoring from any point on the field using my head and both feet. The bigger toolbox you have, the better the chance of scoring. Having great team-mates over the years certainly helps!

SEND THEM VICTORIOUS

Two English coaches at the 2023 World Cup have had very different career paths. South Korea's Colin Bell and Canada's Bev Priestman explain how Gary Lineker, Jurgen Klopp and Phil Neville brought them to this moment

Words Rich Edwards

Regardless of how South Korea do in Australia and New Zealand, Colin Bell, their English manager, already deserves a winners' medal. Our interview takes place via Zoom and his chosen background is a picture of Manchester City's players celebrating their FA Cup triumph at Wembley in 1969, including his namesake. World-class.

Bell's back story and CV are as interesting as any of the coaches at the tournament. Having come through the Leicester youth system alongside Gary Lineker in the late 1970s, Bell made his name in Germany, first as a lower-league player, then as a coach working with, among others, Liverpool boss Jurgen Klopp.

"I joined Leicester on schoolboy forms at the age of 14," he explains. "After school, I signed my first contract with them and remained a reserve-team regular until I left – I'm probably one of the most capped reserve team players in the club's history!

"Gary Lineker and I basically grew up together. We played against each other and then played together in youth and reserve teams, too. The last time I saw him was shortly before he moved to Everton.

"I was back from Germany for Christmas and we bumped into each other on a night out," adds Bell, discreetly obeying the omerta of a footballers' Christmas do in the 1980s.

Bell eventually left the Foxes in 1982 and, following a brief spell with non-league side Nuneaton Borough, did what few footballers from English shores were preferring, moving overseas to a country he would call home for the next 34 years.

"An agent in Germany got a free transfer list from the PFA," continues Bell. "A couple of years earlier, he'd met a young guy called David Bennett from Leeds and taken him to the third division in Germany. David had stayed friends with this agent, who was actually the same person that discovered Karl-Heinz Rummenigge and moved him to Bayern Munich.

"He called me and asked if I would be interested in coming to Germany. I packed my bags, took a train to Dover and got on a boat to Ostend. The agent picked me up. He couldn't speak any English and I didn't speak any German. He had a big American car, I'm not sure whether it was a Buick or a Cadillac, but there was no navigation system at that time. He was driving on the motorway with this map fully out and I'm thinking, 'We're going to get killed here' – he couldn't see the road!

"There's a phrase in Germany: '*pass auf*', which means 'Can I have your attention please'. He kept saying it to me but I thought he was just telling me to piss off every five minutes. Turns out he wanted directions."

Bell's career has had its fair share of twists and turns, like his five-year stint at Mainz in Germany while Klopp was coming through the Bundesliga managerial ranks.

"I couldn't have told you back then that he was going to be a fantastic manager, but I thought he would be a good one," reveals Bell. "Kloppo was in charge of the first team and I was coaching the under-23s (at Mainz). All credit to him, he took at least two of my players into the first-team squad."



Apart from a brief spell at Huddersfield in the Premier League in 2011, Bell has been working exclusively in the women's game. He has seen first-hand the enormous strides made by clubs and countries, not solely in Europe but across the world.

"Every year you can see that the game is getting better and better," he says. "The quality level of the players, the technical level and fitness levels have improved. The girls can now have the same dream that I had when I was a young boy. Quite often when I'm talking about this topic, I say that I've got three sisters back in Leicester. And if one of those girls had the same dream as me at that time, you know, in the '60s, they'd have been laughed at."

Korea will meet Germany, Morocco and Colombia in their fourth appearance at a World Cup. Only once, in Canada in 2015, have they managed to reach the knockout stages of the competition. So, what can we expect Down Under this summer?

"If we can get out of the group, I think that would be regarded as a major success," says Bell. "For me personally, I know it's going to be tough but if we do get out of the group, my expectation would be for us to advance further into the competition.

"Put it this way, I approach every single game expecting to win, regardless of who we play against. But that expectation is always based on good arguments and good reasoning, which is down to preparation."

A nation hopes he has more far success navigating his way out of Group H than he did helping his driver get from Ostend to Germany on the autobahn many years ago.

Below left Bell aims to progress out of the group **Below** Consett's finest leads the Olympic champs

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Another English coach looking to make a mark on the World Cup is Bev Priestman, in charge of a highly fancied Canada side. The Olympic champions have been drawn against host nation Australia, Ireland and Nigeria in Group B, and one part of England will be paying attention, just as they were this winter when Canada's men made their first appearance at a World Cup since 1986.

"I don't know what the population of Consett is but I know that everybody knows everybody, so it's definitely not that big!" laughs Priestman. "So, I guess the fact that both the manager of the Canadian's men's side and the Canadian women's side come from the same little town in Durham is pretty remarkable." She's not wrong.

John Herdman's outfit did their country proud in Qatar, despite finishing bottom of a group containing two of the eventual semi-finalists. Now Priestman is out to ensure that her hometown and the entire population of one of the world's largest countries have plenty to cheer seven months on. Whatever happens, this World Cup will be a world away from her own football upbringing.

"As a girl back then, you'd end up playing a lot of street football – the boys would knock on the door, you'd put the jumpers down as goal posts and away you'd go," she recalls. "John Herdman actually coached me. He had a Brazilian Soccer School and I would go there and play every night, or whenever I got the opportunity. From there, I went to John Moores University and did a degree in the science of football before getting involved with Everton."

Priestman, like Bell, is well-travelled. She cut her coaching teeth in New Zealand, working in the country between 2008 and 2013, then headed to Canada where she helped to implement a youth development system that is now bearing fruit. She acted as Phil Neville's assistant during his time in charge of the Lionesses, travelling home with a nine-month-old baby to take on the role, and was part of the England coaching staff at the last World Cup in France, where Neville's side reached the final four.

Steering Canada to that stage or beyond would be cause for considerable celebration on both sides of the Atlantic. And with the men's World Cup taking place in the USA, Canada and Mexico in 2026, she's hopeful that investment in the women's game could increase in the next few years.

"What this country desperately needs is to have that level of resource. We punch above our weight here. If you compare our budget to what the other top 10 nations have, you wouldn't believe it. But that speaks to the Canadian mindset, the underdog mentality, punching above our weight and working harder than any other team. That's always the mindset this team has."

It's a jumpers for goalposts, up and at 'em mentality that has served her so well in her career so far. Olympic gold has already been delivered. A World Cup win would top the lot.



"BOTH MEN'S AND WOMEN'S COACHES COMING FROM THE SAME SMALL TOWN IS PRETTY REMARKABLE"

THE ORIGINAL CHLOE KELLY

Brandi Chastain's celebration in 1999 inspired an England hero last year – and remains one of the greatest moments in the history of the Women's World Cup. We look back at the highlights of previous tournaments

Words Chris Flanagan

Fourteen editions of the men's World Cup took place before the first FIFA Women's World Cup – two decades earlier though, an unofficial tournament welcomed the biggest-ever crowd for a female match.

The first unofficial Women's World Cup was organised by FIEFF (Federation of Independent European Female Football). It was held in Italy in 1970, a month after Pele's Brazil had lifted the men's trophy in Mexico. The England women's team didn't play their first ever official international until 1972 – female teams were still banned from playing at Football League grounds on these shores – but a squad travelled to take part in the seven-team event, thumping Germany 5-1 in their opening game before losing to eventual winners Denmark in the semis and Mexico in the third place play-off.

A year later, England were represented at the second unofficial World Cup. Qualifying for the six-side competition featured a fixture between France and the Netherlands, now counted as the first FIFA-recognised women's match. The Dutch team mistakenly thought the game was a friendly against Stade de Reims, filing a protest when they lost and learned the result had cost them a place at the World Cup. France's players didn't realise victory had earned them qualification until afterwards, either.

England's team for the tournament in Mexico contained players as young as 13, playing in front of 80,000 fans at the Azteca in defeat to the hosts, before Denmark won the final in front of an estimated 110,000 – dwarfing the official women's record crowd of 91,648, set for a Champions League fixture between Barcelona and Wolfsburg at the Camp Nou in 2022.

Five Mundialito tournaments ('little World Cup' in Spanish) followed during the 1980s – England won two and Italy three – prior to the launch of the FIFA Women's Invitation Tournament in China in 1988, a test event to establish the feasibility of a FIFA Women's World Cup. The event was a success and the Women's World Cup was born.

1991: THE M&M's CUP

FIFA's inaugural Women's World Cup wasn't actually called that. Instead, it was given the less-than-snappy title of the 1st FIFA World Championship for Women's Football for the M&M's Cup. Like the test event three years earlier, it took place in the Guangdong region of China. The hosts kicked off with a 4-0 win over Norway watched by 65,000 supporters in Guangzhou, with attendances averaging at around 18,000 for the 12-team tournament, albeit some tickets were handed out for free.

Matches were only 80 minutes long, with the USA inevitably triumphing after a narrow 2-1 triumph against Norway in the final. USA forward Michelle Akers plundered 10 goals in just six games during the tournament, still a Women's World Cup record.

1995: "WHERE DID EVERYONE GO?"

Bulgaria was supposed to host the second Women's World Cup but withdrew ahead of the tournament, which was then awarded to Sweden instead. Matches were increased to 90 minutes, while teams also received a two-minute time-out in each half – an idea that probably would have made more sense in searing heat rather than in Scandinavia.

The new setting for the tournament didn't exactly attract the fans – only 250 people watched Canada's group-stage draw against Nigeria in Helsingborg, with gates averaging 4,316 throughout a World Cup won by Norway after a final victory over Germany.





Clockwise from above China fans have fun in Canada in 2015; Chastain's iconic moment in '99; Rapinoe replies to Trump; lovin' it at the 2003 World Cup Final

1999: AN ICONIC IMAGE

Twenty-three years before Chloe Kelly marked her winner in the Euro 2022 Final by removing her shirt and celebrating in a sports bra, Brandi Chastain did the same after winning the World Cup for the USA. It remains arguably the most iconic photo in the history of women's football.

Her triumph also came on home soil after Australia and Chile withdrew from the bidding to host. The USA originally planned to stage matches in college stadiums, until the success of the women's football event at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics prompted them to supersize it, using several of the grounds that hosted the men's World Cup in 1994.

The total attendance for the tournament surpassed Sweden's 1995 efforts in just the first eight group matches. Crowds averaged more than 37,000, with the final watched by 90,185 at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena (both remain Women's World Cup records).

Double-header games were played at the stadiums each day. 'N Sync, B*Witched and Billie Piper sang at the opening ceremony and Jennifer Lopez at the closing ceremony, before Chastain's spot-kick gave the USA a shootout victory over China in the final.

2003: CHINA VIRUS RETHINK

The 2003 World Cup was originally awarded to China. However, the SARS outbreak in Asia prompted FIFA to strip them of hosting rights as a precaution. Australia and Sweden both offered to step in – as did the USA, who were chosen as a safe pair of hands at short notice. Awkwardly, the tournament kicked off days after the nation's professional female league folded amid financial problems.

Unlike their previous hosting of the event four years earlier, more modest stadiums had to be utilised because of a lack of time to prepare – crowds averaged 21,000, with



Germany beating Sweden to lift the trophy at LA Galaxy's Home Depot Center.

2007: GERMANY AGAIN

No team had retained the Women's World Cup until Germany defeated Brazil in the final of the 2007 tournament. China hosted four years later than planned, while the USA were surprisingly held by North Korea in their group opener. Germany battered Argentina 11-0, a World Cup record until the USA tonked Thailand 13-0 in 2019.

Brazil's Marta bagged both the Golden Ball and Golden Boot – with 17 goals across five tournaments, she remains the World Cup's all-time leading scorer – but she couldn't prevent the Selecao's 2-0 defeat in the final.

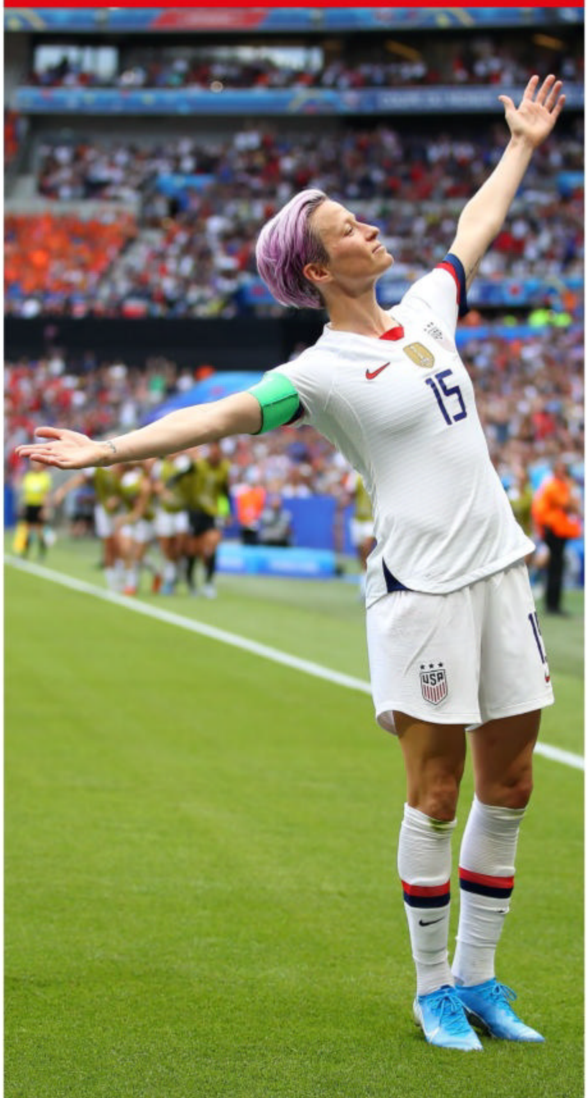
2011: BUNCH OF DOPES

Holders Germany hosted – after failed bids from France, Switzerland, Canada, Peru... and Australia again – but their hopes of a third successive crown were ended by Japan, who also stunned the USA on penalties in the final. There was controversy elsewhere: Colombia goalkeeper Yineth Varon tested positive for a banned substance before the World Cup started and was suspended for two years, while two North Korean players were caught doping prior to their third group game against Colombia. The whole squad was later tested, with three more positive results, and North Korea were banned from the next World Cup.

2015: ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

The options to host the 2015 World Cup weren't entirely perfect: Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe or Canada, who opted to play the tournament on artificial pitches. That didn't go down too well with the players: 50 of whom filed a lawsuit on the basis of gender discrimination, stating that the men's game would never be staged on artificial surfaces. A boycott was mooted, but the competition went ahead at the planned venues.

Colombia produced arguably the Women's World Cup's biggest-ever shock by beating France in the group stage, but Ecuador fared less well, losing 6-0 to Cameroon and 10-1 to Switzerland, when Angie Ponce notched an unusual hat-trick – one at the right end, two in her own net. Ecuador bowed out with a creditable 1-0 loss to Japan, the eventual finalists, who made it to Vancouver only to fall 4-0 behind inside 16 minutes to the USA – Carli Lloyd's hat-trick helping them to gain revenge and regain the title.



2019: TAKE THAT, TRUMP

When a video surfaced mid-tournament of Megan Rapinoe saying, "I'm not going to the f**king White House" if the USA retained the World Cup, Donald Trump didn't take it well.

"Megan should WIN first before she TALKS!" ranted the president on Twitter – the capital letters really do make all the difference. Rapinoe's response? Five minutes into the US' next game, a quarter-final against hosts France, the captain fired in a free-kick, then celebrated with arms outstretched as if to say, 'Come on then, Mr President, what are you going to tweet about that?'

"It was a bit of a clapback," she later told *FFT*. Rapinoe went on to claim the Golden Ball and Golden Boot, netting in the final, as the USA won. Can she talk now, Donald?



After growing up in poverty, Antony will never take his life at Manchester United for granted. In an exclusive interview, he tells *FFT* how he made it, and why he thinks he can be the world's best player...

Words Felipe Rocha

WE STARVED IN THE FAVELA, BUT I HAD A DREAM

It all began in the 'Little Hell'. That's the name given to the favela where Antony grew up, in the north of Sao Paulo. It's where the 23-year-old first learned his dribbling skills, the most striking characteristic of his game.

There, the Brazilian needed to dribble past foes far tougher than those he's encountered on Premier League pitches so far. In the Little Hell – or *Inferninho*, to give the favela its Portuguese name – Antony saw people's lives ruined by crime. His family, too, were facing their own issues.

"I saw a lot of people going down a path that wasn't right, do you know what I mean?" he tells *FourFourTwo* now. "I saw people losing their lives – it was our reality back then. There were days when I didn't have much to eat. My parents always did everything they could for us, but it was really tough. We starved, but we always kept our heads high. I had a dream and my family lived it with me."

That dream was to become a footballer – and it ended up transforming his life. At the age of 11, he was invited for a trial at Sao Paulo, the same club he'd cheered on from the stands as a supporter. Unsurprisingly, the skinny boy drew attention for his skills on the ball and not only passed the test but stayed at the club for almost a decade, climbing through the age groups until he reached Sao Paulo's first team in 2018. Antony no longer had to watch his heroes from the stands – he was beside them on the pitch.

After his first few games as a professional footballer, he would still return to the same humble house in *Inferninho*. Those early performances caught Ajax's attention, and by 2020 he was heading to Europe for two successful seasons in Amsterdam under Erik ten Hag, the man who brought him to Old Trafford last August.

"We built a very good relationship at Ajax and that's still the case here at Manchester United," explains Antony. "Erik talks to me a lot, he gives me loads of advice, he guides me and also gives me a rap on the knuckles every now and again. It's normal. He wants the best for me, he wants me to evolve. That gives me confidence to fight for more."

That United splashed out £81.3 million for Antony last summer, with a further £4.3m agreed in potential add-ons, says everything about the confidence that Ten Hag has in the 23-year-old.

While the Brazilian is positive about his first season in England, in which he helped his new club end a six-year trophy drought and also bagged a Europa League winner against Barcelona, he's certain that Premier League fans still haven't seen the very best of him.

"Of course I can give more at Manchester United," he insists. "Every player should think that way – we all need and want to improve game after game. I'm still young, I have a lot to grow, improve and conquer. I don't lack will and hard work, that's for sure."

As he tells *FFT*, they're attributes that were instilled within him from a very young age...

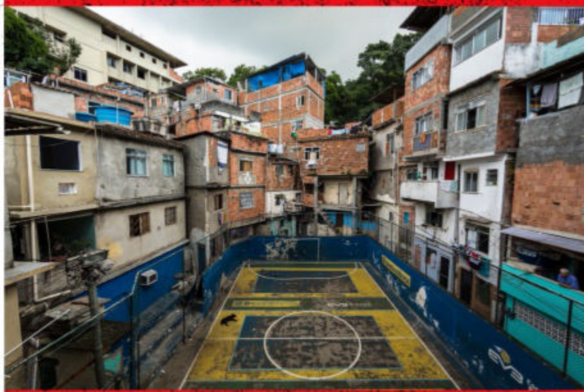
You once said that "pressure was when I lived in the favela". How much did those experiences shape your personality and your game?
My childhood wasn't easy at all. My brothers and I went through a lot of difficulties, but our parents always did everything to give us education, love and food. It was a tough period of our lives and, yes, the real pressure was definitely there. But I look back with joy, as we took many lessons from those days. That's when we learned the importance of having a good character, strong values and education. Those experiences shape you as a human being, I have no doubt about it. When it comes to football, that's where it all began. Football was always part of my life – I just wanted to go to the little pitch in my community, and play football barefoot with my brothers and neighbours.

What was it like to live in *Inferninho*?
The worst memories are definitely losing several friends because of things that went wrong. We had to keep our heads in the right place to walk on a different path. I was a young man, I just wanted to play football and be happy, but I had a lot of support from my family to make my dream of becoming a footballer come true. I didn't make it by myself. I wouldn't have been able to fulfil my dreams without their support.

How did the opportunity to join Sao Paulo come about in the first place?
Well, for me, having an opportunity to play for Sao Paulo was something huge. I grew up as a Sao Paulo fan – I used to watch the matches from the stands of the Morumbi stadium during my childhood. I was a young boy when I joined Sao Paulo's youth teams, but things weren't smooth all the way for me at the club. I was very close to getting released on three different occasions, but I never gave up. Finally, I managed to fulfil my dream and reach the first team.

How proud are you to be able to provide a better life for your family now?
Very proud. My family is everything for me. It's because of them that I am where I am now. They were always beside me during the journey, and always will be. My parents gave me the best education to help me become a good human being. My brother is also a huge reference – we're always with each other. My family wants the best for me, and that's what a real family does. I go on to the pitch thinking of them in every game.

When you were in Sao Paulo's first team, you agreed a return to the U20 team to play in an important youth competition. What was it like to make that decision and how important was it for your career?
I'd already played a few games for the first team, and then they asked me to feature in







Clockwise from right So much silverware he needed the sunnies; skills at Sao Paulo; and the favela was his school; "I'm getting booked for this anyway, so..."; looking for Erik at United

"THE WORST MEMORIES ARE DEFINITELY LOSING FRIENDS BECAUSE SOME THINGS WENT WRONG"





the under-20 side for that tournament the following year. I spoke to my family and my staff, and we came to the conclusion that it would probably be a great opportunity for me. So that's what happened. Luckily, I was able to produce some good performances and catch people's attention – I provided an assist and scored a goal in the final! I'm sure that those performances changed a lot of things for me. You know, when I returned to the first team, the scenario was completely different actually. I was seen from a different perspective. I was ready to be successful with the first team.

Why did your move to Ajax work out so well for you? It was a big change.
There were other clubs interested in me, but again, my family and my staff were crucial to help me find the most suitable outcome. We spoke to try to figure out which was the best choice for my career plan – everything has to be very well thought out. It was an important step not only for my career, but also in my life. Ajax seemed the best option for me – they're a club who have supported young footballers historically, and it was no different for me. I saw it as an opportunity to develop my game even more, and myself as a person as well. I wanted to introduce myself to European football. I spent some wonderful years in the Netherlands – that period had a huge impact on my life. I was quite happy there. I got to know the culture and people. Amsterdam is part of my life.

Did any English clubs talk to you before you joined Ajax?
Yes, but not only from England. I know some other clubs were also keen to learn about my situation at Sao Paulo. But, as I said, we came to the conclusion that Ajax was the best option at that moment, and it proved to be the right call.

What was your relationship like with Erik ten Hag in those early days together?
We got along great from the very beginning. I'd say that we've always understood each other very well. I find it really important to ▸





know that the manager will put his trust in you – he understands a lot about football and I'm sure he has a bright future ahead of him. I'm very happy to work with him, and to have his help to develop my game.

At Ajax, your goal and assist numbers improved a lot compared to your days at Sao Paulo – in 82 games, you scored 24 and assisted 22. What was Ten Hag's role in that evolution to becoming more of a predator on the pitch?
As I said, he had a key role in my evolution, in the recent development of every aspect of my game. Overall, he's always trusted in me and I'm grateful for that. When you have the confidence of your manager, you feel more confident as well – that's crucial for any player. In my early days in Europe, he used to talk to me on a daily basis, to show me how I could improve and also how I had to behave. You know, I was just a young kid coming into European football, so his help was very important.

How did you first learn of Man United's interest? When Ten Hag took charge, did you imagine that he might try to sign you?
I basically knew that it could be a decisive transfer window for me. Once again, my family, staff and I talked a lot during that time and came to the conclusion that it was the perfect moment to take a new step in my career. So when the possibility to sign for Manchester United arose, it obviously brought with it the chance of playing in the Premier League and working with my old manager again. It was the whole package. I was really excited about that opportunity – it was actually the perfect one for me. As I said, I had a brilliant time at Ajax and I'll forever be grateful, but at that moment I understood it was time to take a new path, it was time for a new project. I'm very happy with that decision.

Were any other clubs interested?
Yes, I've been told about some other clubs' interest. It's normal in football. But honestly, as soon as I heard about Manchester United's interest, I was convinced that was the best choice for me. They are a massive club, full of glory and ambition to win more trophies. Once again, I'm sure I made the right choice. I'm very happy here.

You're one of the most expensive signings in Premier League history. Have you ever felt pressure because of that?
Well, I can't deny that it was a big-money transfer, but I know what I can do on the pitch. I have no doubts about my potential. Manchester United are one of the biggest clubs in the world and that's exactly where every footballer wants to be. If I'm here, it means I've done things throughout my career to deserve this big opportunity. The pressure will always exist regardless of the price tag, especially when you wear a shirt with the importance of Manchester United's. I can't allow the off-pitch pressure to have any impact on my game, though. My focus must be on me, on my team-mates. I came to England with a huge ambition to make history at Old Trafford. From my perspective, I think I achieved important individual and collective goals in my first campaign here.

How do you assess your first season?
I was brought to Old Trafford to produce good performances on the pitch, and that's my exclusive focus. I'm completely focused on games and training sessions, in order to try to show the best possible version of me. I know there's a huge pressure, it's normal when you play for Manchester United. I know people expect me to perform at a high level to help the club and put it on the top shelf of world football once again. Looking back to my first season here, I'd say the balance is quite positive to be honest. As a team, we proved to be competitive in every competition we were involved in, and I'm sure we're on the right path to improve more next season.

Do you think the club are on track to fight for the Premier League title in 2023-24?
We certainly are. We have a top quality squad and we proved this season that we can fight for every single trophy. So why wouldn't it be possible to replicate that next season? I'm very confident we'll do it and, hopefully, improve our performances and results even more. I'm looking forward to it. What I can say is that we're working hard

MALTA: BIG FANS OF THE SEAL DRIBBLE

Thanks to his love for spinning with the ball, Antony has his own signature move – these three did, too...

RICARDO INFANTE
Long before Erik Lamela came along and scored not one but two ludicrous rabona goals for Tottenham, the skill was originated by fellow Argentine Infante, who reportedly first used the move for Estudiantes in 1948. Did he win BBC Goal of the Season for it, though? No, he certainly did not. Lamela 1 Infante 0.

CUAUHTEMOC BLANCO
For a glorious period of football history, the main fun of watching Mexico at any World Cup was seeing if Blanco would perform his *Cuauhtemina* move during a match – the striker would grab the ball between both feet, then jump between two defenders with a bunny hop. Utterly bonkers, but somehow brilliant.

KERLON
When you hear the name Kerlon, who immediately thinks 'seal dribble'? Most of you? Good. The Brazilian became known for balancing the ball on his head and then running with it at Cruzeiro, earning a move to Inter. But it all went wrong from there – by 2015, he was playing in Malta. Maybe try using your feet?



"THE SPIN DRIBBLE IS PART OF MY GAME. IT'S PART OF THE JOY OF BRAZILIAN FOOTBALL"

on a daily basis and we'll always give our best to put Manchester United on top.

Manchester United are back in the Champions League for next season. How much are you looking forward to that?
That's a dream for me. Manchester United belong in that competition – qualifying isn't only excellent news for our club, but for the Champions League itself. This club's presence makes the tournament even more valuable. I'm sure that we'll be ready for it, and I have no doubts that we'll fight for the title next season. I'm looking forward to playing in the Champions League for this great club – it will definitely be another fantastic achievement for me in England.

You've received some attention for your unusual spin dribble, when you twirl around while controlling the ball with your foot. Have you done it since childhood?
Yes, it comes from my early days back in the favela, but I perfected it during my time at Sao Paulo. It's part of my game and it's part of the joy of Brazilian football. I know it has become a trademark of my game – I don't mind that, it's something I'll carry with me. I'll always attempt to play the game with joy, but also with objectivity. That's important to say. I want to deliver on the pitch what's expected from me, but I don't need and don't want to lose my essence of dribbling and being fast.

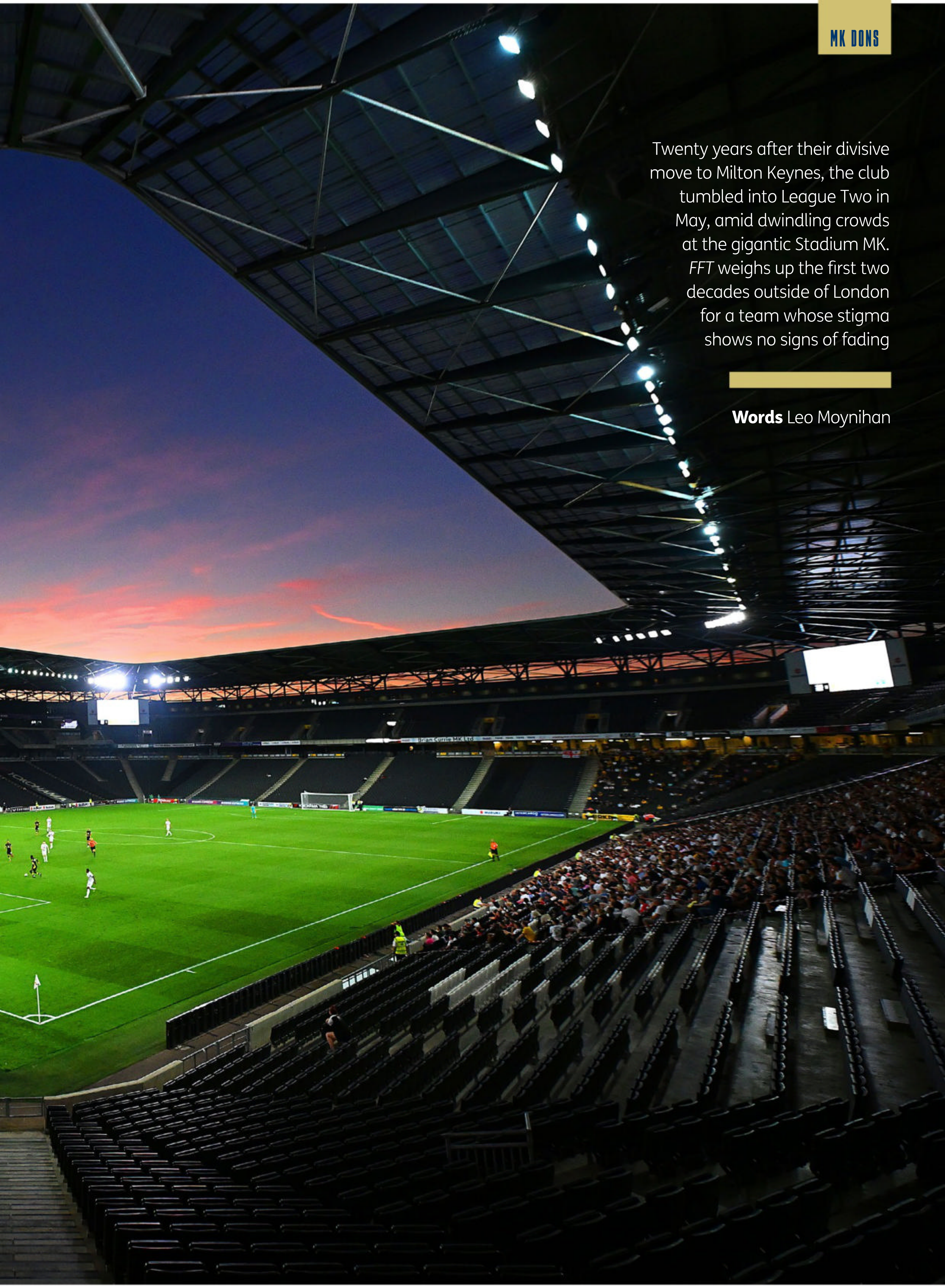
Above Antony's feet are under the table going into year two **Above left** Fans will look forward to more from his box of tricks

What was it like to play at the 2022 World Cup for Brazil?
It was a dream come true for me – I always dreamed of playing for the Selecao and featuring at a World Cup. I managed to do it, so it was something really special. I'll never forget it. Unfortunately we didn't reach our goal in Qatar – we got knocked out in the quarter-finals, which was very frustrating for everyone. We could have gone all the way to the final, but that's football – we were beaten by Croatia, who deserve the credit. I'm sure that Brazil have great players to come back stronger in 2026. We'll definitely fight for the title once again – that's what Brazil always does. I want to be there again – to make it possible, I must be 100 per cent at my club, delivering at Manchester United week in, week out. That's the only way to play at another World Cup. Hopefully I'll be able to make it happen.

What are your other hopes and ambitions for the future?
First and foremost, I want to make history at Manchester United. I want to write my name alongside club legends like Cristiano Ronaldo, Wayne Rooney, Ryan Giggs and others. This red shirt is full of glory and being a champion here is something very special. I could already feel that taste last season, but the next one has everything to be even better. I'm confident it will be. The individual achievements will always be a reflection of collective performances, but when it comes to individual achievements, every footballer dreams of being the best in the world, right? I'm no different. Why not? I'll only achieve that if I perform with excellence at my club – and if I'm winning titles.

MK DONS
HAS THE FRANCHISE WORKED?





Twenty years after their divisive move to Milton Keynes, the club tumbled into League Two in May, amid dwindling crowds at the gigantic Stadium MK. *FFT* weighs up the first two decades outside of London for a team whose stigma shows no signs of fading

Words Leo Moynihan



In 1967, the people at ITN travelled to a small, agricultural village in North Buckinghamshire called Milton Keynes. Home to 200 residents, the village and its surrounding areas had been designated to house a new town; a place to accommodate the post-war overspill of people needing new homes and a new life. A reporter, taking the opinions of those already living there, found a settled community, suspicious of change. "It's the Londoners," one woman said with a smile. "We just don't like them."

Fast-forward 56 years and within that new town, in a 30,500-capacity multipurpose stadium, you can hear a chant. "No one likes us, no one likes us, we don't care."

A lot has happened between ITN's visit and the present day, from the city folk who moved into a freshly constructed town to the south London football club that followed them. But while the locals' distrust of their new neighbours subsided long ago, there remains much scepticism around England's most resented football team.

EXIT, PURSUED BY A WOMBLE

The final score was 2-1. In May 2002, after an FA arbitration meeting, a three-man independent commission gave their decision. Two of them voted in the affirmative and one voted against. Wimbledon FC would be allowed to move a full 60 miles up the road to Milton Keynes.

It was a moment that rocked the English game. Pete Winkelman, a 44-year-old former music executive who had lived in Milton Keynes since the early '90s, had been seeking a Football League club to find its place there. The town's non-league club, Milton Keynes City of the Spartan South Midlands Football League in tier eight, had been mooted; Winkelman, though, saw that route as being too expensive a project. Luton Town were approached, as were QPR, Crystal Palace and Barnet, but it was Wimbledon chairman Charles Koppel whose ears were most pricked by an idea that he felt was the only way to save his club from financial oblivion.

Winkelman's plans included a modern new stadium, but while a suitable temporary home was sought in Milton Keynes, the club remained at Selhurst Park for the 2002-03 campaign, having played there for more than a decade. They finished 10th in the second tier that season, but angry Wimbledon fans boycotted games and gates dwindled. Even their mascot, Wandle the Womble, deserted them as the Wombles brand refused to extend the licence.

The club had fallen into administration by the time Milton Keynes' National Hockey Stadium was brought up to Football League standard to allow the move to happen in 2003, for the fifth home game of the new campaign. Wimbledon were bottom of the table with just three points from eight league matches; only 1,054 people watched their last match at Selhurst Park, against Wigan.

With an artificial pitch converted into grass and temporary stands erected, the ground welcomed its new residents with a 2-2 draw against Burnley. In front of 5,639 supporters, the yet-to-be-renamed Wimbledon FC were 2-0 down at half-time, before salvaging a draw through goals from a veteran Dean Holdsworth and a young Patrick Agyemang, who headed in Jobi McAnuff's cross. The first line of *The Guardian*'s match coverage read: "English football's first exercise in franchising could not be less glamorous."

Among those attending the game was Matt Lazenby, a Middlesex-based fan who had followed Wimbledon since early childhood, watching the victorious 1988 FA Cup Final again and again on VHS. Having grown up travelling to Plough Lane and then Selhurst Park, he felt inclined to continue to follow the club after the move to Milton Keynes.

"The experience was initially uncomfortable and I took very little pleasure from those early campaigns," Lazenby tells *FFT*. "It was a hockey stadium not built for football – very weird – but my team were playing there and I wanted to support them. Once the whistle blew, it could have been anywhere.

"It was strange, but what was noticeable fairly quickly was that there were 6,000 or even 8,000 people turning up to watch this new thing in their town. You could instantly feel that there was a market for it – an audience – and that was something that the club hadn't had for 11 years or so."

Administration still clouded the skies as Wimbledon finished bottom of the second tier, 22 points short of safety. They won only two of their 20 matches in Milton Keynes.

It would be their last season known as Wimbledon FC. In June 2004, Winkelman's Inter MK group purchased the club and promptly renamed it MK Dons, with a new badge and a new white kit.

For Winkelman, what was needed, if his club was to be truly recognised, was a new stadium. Using financial assistance from Asda, who built a supermarket on adjacent land, the arena took impressive shape. Many fans saw it as nothing more than a property deal, but Winkelman was quick to push back. "People think it's easy – you get an Asda and build a stadium like this," he stated. "We've done something extraordinary."

MK Dons would spend three more seasons at the hockey stadium before Stadium MK was finally ready to open. Narrowly avoiding relegation to the fourth tier in 2004-05, they succumbed to the drop a year later, just six seasons after Wimbledon had been in the Premier League. In 2006-07, MK Dons lost in the League Two play-offs.

For 2007-08, the town Winkelman once called "the biggest place in the south-east of England, outside of London" was able to











boast one of the country's best stadiums, including a hotel and not one but four video screens – a figure unmatched anywhere in England until Tottenham's new arena was constructed a decade later.

"I remember that summer's test event against Chelsea," says Toby Lock, an MK Dons fan who now covers the club's matches for the *MK Citizen*. "It felt like we had a football club here and there was a huge change in mindset. Suddenly it didn't feel out of place or temporary. We'd been called a plastic club, a fake club, we'd spent years in a half-built stadium designed for a completely different sport, but now here we were, in a beautiful place, and it was all ours."

"THERE'S AN AGENDA – AFC ARE SAID TO HAVE WON THE 1988 FA CUP. THEY DIDN'T. MK DONS DID"

Clockwise from above Nice ground, but too big for its owners?; Will Grigg, Lewis Baker and Dele Alli were a real force in 2014-15; Paul Ince brought the club their first trophy as MK Dons; The House That Pete Built; Won't somebody think of the hockey fans?

"YOUR GROUND'S TOO BIG FOR YOU"

The club would enjoy its first success in that 2007-08 season, as Paul Ince's charges won the League Two title and the Football League Trophy. Winkelman's 'project' had legs: the club's academy began to bear fruit, most notably with the emergence of Dele Alli. Spurs paid £5 million to buy Alli in 2015, the same year that MK Dons claimed a first promotion to the Championship.

Months earlier, Alli had been among the stars – Will Grigg scored twice – as MK Dons thrashed Manchester United 4-0 in the League Cup, in front of nearly 27,000 fans.

"Best night of my life – no doubt about it," says 20-year-old Ollie Charnock, a lifelong MK Dons fan, the club now having been in existence long enough for that epithet to be possible. "I've never experienced something like it, and I don't think I ever will again."

In the Championship, the club averaged attendances north of 13,000. Their stadium began to host high-profile matches, from the 2014 FA Women's Cup Final to four games at last year's Women's European Championship.

But MK Dons' Championship tenure would be a one-year adventure. Ending the season without a win in 11 games sent them back into League One, and since then, momentum has turned against them. A second tumble into League Two was quickly reversed, but hopes of rising into the Championship again were dashed in 2022 when even a haul of 89 points proved insufficient, followed by defeat in the play-offs. Their smartly-scouted stars – Scott Twine, League One's Player of the Year, was signed on a free transfer and Harry Darling as a 21-year-old from League Two – left for bigger things, and this time, even with fees coming in, their recruitment fell short.

Having impressed, manager Liam Manning then struggled to get results in 2022-23. His mid-season replacement, Mark Jackson, was himself sacked this May, as MK Dons dropped into League Two once again. Twenty years after the move to Milton Keynes – and still with Dean Lewington in defence, after 900 appearances for Wimbledon and MK Dons – the club will go into the 2023-24 season two divisions lower than when they started.

An average attendance of 8,462 in 2022-23 was the club's lowest for any campaign at Stadium MK apart from the pandemic season and one in League Two, when crowds weren't boosted by large away followings – Ipswich, for instance, took more than 6,500 fans in February. For matches with fewer visiting supporters, and the stadium less than a third full, atmosphere can prove a struggle. Early League Cup games were watched by fewer than 2,500 fans and a Football League Trophy clash against Newport by just 635, meaning fewer than one in every 48 seats was taken.

Supporter Charnock acknowledges issues with the atmosphere but insists there is hope. "The majority of this club's fans these days ▸







Top Leicester fans in the League Cup this season showed that distance is no barrier to disgust **Above left** A badge of honour for fans **Above right** Grigg had an altogether less enjoyable time with MK in 2022-23

are under 25 – that has to be a massive positive for the future," he explains. "Many of the fans before us perhaps came out of interest and supported another club, and us younger lot were almost outsiders. We came with new ideas about singing sections and songs. While the atmosphere still needs working on, there's a youthful presence."

Whatever their age, they have all had to hear a consistent level of hate from fans of other teams, who still see MK Dons as the Frankenstein's monster of English football. Notions of a franchise simply won't wash on these shores. "You can't change opinions, even after 20 years," says Charnock. "The hatred against us is strong, and we get it from everyone. 'Your ground's too big for you' and other songs about the 'franchise' are always there, but we embrace it. 'No one likes us, we don't care' is our comeback."

Millwall's call to arms may seem out of place in leafy Buckinghamshire, but it does create an us-against-them mentality. "We're as hated as Millwall have ever been, but that creates a togetherness," says Lazenby. "Every MK Dons fan gets into arguments with other fans about the decisions they've made. There is a very loyal fanbase, galvanised by ridicule and disbelief from other supporters who can't understand we are genuine fans of our club."

STILL WAITING FOR THE FRENZY

Fans of AFC Wimbledon, the club that rose from the ashes of Winkelman's fire, would take issue with the words "genuine" and "our club". The enmity remains uniquely bitter. Just persuading any Wimbledon supporter to talk to *FourFourTwo* for this feature was hard: heaps still refuse to acknowledge MK Dons' presence at all. "I try to stay away from the word 'rivalry'," declares Gary Jordan, author of *Show Me The Way to Plough Lane: The Remarkable Story of Wimbledon FC's Return Home*. "It's a club we don't recognise and it shouldn't be in existence." The two teams will be together in the fourth tier next season after AFC Wimbledon followed their own relegation with a dismal 21st-placed finish.

Lazenby, who attended the final seasons in London before following his club to Milton Keynes, takes firm issue with the notion that MK Dons are the bad guys. "The move to Selhurst Park was the death knell," he says. "Wimbledon had no ability to make revenue other than selling players. What followed was relegation and crowds stopped coming.

"I remember going to Sheffield United away in 2002. There were so few away fans that they closed the away end and put us in a box. An executive box. That says it all. It was me, a few others, and our goalkeeper Kelvin Davis' mum. We had no fanbase left.

"If I'd been a south-west Londoner, used to walking through Wimbledon to Plough Lane, I would have been really disgruntled – I get that, 100 per cent. But, ever since the move, there's been a one-sided media agenda in favour of AFC over MK Dons. Just look at the FA Cup. Every year, AFC are said to have won it in 1988. Well, they didn't. MK Dons did. I resent that we had to renounce those titles.

"I don't want to see what happened to Wimbledon happen again. It must not be a precedent. But the way it's viewed – the angels and demons created – is all wrong."

WINKELMAN'S PLAN IN 2003 WAS NEVER FOR DONS TO BE IN LEAGUE TWO IN 2023

Wimbledon fans argue that they stopped attending matches only after the FA panel confirmed the move in 2002. Supporters such as Jordan believe that, when it comes to MK Dons, time has proven them right. "It's a great stadium up there, but they got it wrong," he tells *FFT*. "You only have to look at their attendances now and how large a catchment area they have – you can see it hasn't worked. Winkelman called it a "frenzy of football waiting to happen", but they were sold a dream that just isn't going to happen."

Suggestions that the relocation hasn't worked don't sit well with those who attend Stadium MK week in, week out. "The biggest disappointment in my football life is watching this team fail to live up to the infrastructure built around it," laments Lazenby. "It's far from a failure, though. We've been told for 20 years by other fans that football is all about history – that we have no history, so how could I support them? Twenty years is too short a time to try to claim a history; too short a time to deem this project a failure."

As with most clubs, fortunes on the pitch can fluctuate. MK Dons, however, continue to pour more cement around their unsteady foundations. Is it working? "Yes, the club are very much a part of the town now," insists Lock. "They do work in local schools and the community. There's a leisure complex, too, which makes it a focal point for that part of the town. It has taken several years and loads of infrastructure but there's a cinema, shopping, a McDonald's and a KFC. While some people may scoff at that, it's important to how the town views the club – it's how modern clubs have to get along. Clubs up and down the pyramid have to look into new revenue streams to help build the football side of things."

Two decades on, MK Dons remain a club striving to be something. They face scorn wherever they go, but for young fans such as Charnock, who only know them as their team, supporting them is the same as supporting any other. "It's a great club – it's my club," he says. "I'm so grateful that there is a club near my home that I can go and watch. Like many of my generation, I didn't want to be merely an armchair fan. We have lots of downs, but who knows what's around the corner? Make my dreams come true."

So far, that hasn't happened – not in the way Winkelman hoped back in 2003. The plan was never for MK Dons to be in League Two in 2023. Their position 20 years from now will do plenty to define the success or failure of the franchise. Today, as with that FA panel in 2002, opinion remains divided.


adidas

SẼNOR BECKS

David Beckham's seismic move to Real Madrid in 2003 seemed like a match made in heaven – and at first, it was. But when managerial madness rocked Los Blancos, Becks faced down the nightmare the only way he knew how...

Words Ed McCambridge **Additional reporting** Dani Gil

Beneath the floodlights on a stormy night at Old Trafford, Manchester United's No.7 draws a breath, 30 yards from goal. The scoreboard reads: Manchester United 4 Real Madrid 3. Still trailing on aggregate, United need this free-kick to go in, plus one more goal in stoppage time, if they're to reach the semi-finals of the 2002-03 Champions League.

He's already put two goals past Madrid's Iker Casillas, including, in his own words, "the best free-kick of my United career". A hat-trick would make his 60th-minute introduction seem even more misguided.

The trademark run-up commences, left arm arcing into the night sky. His adidas Predator boot strikes leather. A stadium holds its breath...

Illuminated only by a television screen, he watches the moment back, four hours later, on the sofa of his family home.

This free-kick, unfortunately, sails over the crossbar and disappears into the Stretford End. "F**king hell," he sighs. "If only..."

But then he spots something among the highlights that makes his blood run cold. The cameras have panned to the Old Trafford bench, where his manager of the past decade, Sir Alex Ferguson, realises the tie is now lost. The Scot glares at his player with a look of unmasked contempt.

"That face told me everything I needed to know," Beckham later recalled. "It was over. He wanted me out."

From the day Ferguson called the Beckham family home in 1986 to invite an 11-year-old future England captain to train with United, the youngster had been in awe of his mentor. "He was the man who'd made everything possible for me," he reflected. "The father figure in what had become a second family."

Beckham was the golden boy; the Class of '92 graduate who turned into an overnight celebrity following his famous halfway line goal against Wimbledon in August 1996. The midfielder became the poster boy of a side that went on to win six Premier League titles, two FA Cups and the Champions League, the latter in a remarkable Treble-winning season of 1998-99 which may never be surpassed in the minds of some romantics. During the glory days, Beckham could not falter in his manager's estimations.

"When a relationship like theirs is going strong, everything in the world seems fine," former Manchester United striker Dwight Yorke, who helped conquer Europe alongside Beckham between 1998 and 2002, tells *FFT*. "Everybody is happy when you're winning football matches. For Fergie and Becks – for all of us – life was great."

Beckham was a team-mate's dream, not least if you just so happened to be a striker: a peerless crosser, sensational long-range passer and a workhorse out of possession.

"He was magnificent," enthuses Yorke. "With someone like Becks, who could deliver a football at an incredibly consistent level, you would simply focus on getting yourself into a scoring position – you knew the ball was going to come over with such quality." ▸

Prior to the 4-3 defeat against Real Madrid, however, things had already started to sour. The story is well known by now: golden boy had become Goldenballs, a global icon with the haircuts, modelling deals and pop star girlfriend to prove it. Fergie felt his man had taken an eye off the ball.

"If you were in the media too much, the manager was always a little bit edgier than before," remembers Yorke. "Things start to deteriorate. Game time is affected. It was a whole different level with Becks to the rest of us, of course."

Beckham and his gaffer's final campaign together was marred by squabbling, cold shoulders and the infamous boot-kicking incident in February 2003, which left the player needing stitches above his left eye. By the time Roy Keane hoisted that season's Premier League trophy aloft, rumours of an exit had begun to swirl. The biggest clubs in Italy and Spain were linked.

Then two things happened in the middle of May: first, United's chief executive Peter Kenyon informed Beckham that the club was open to selling him. Then a contract extension was put on the table. "As if to say, 'Sign this or forget it'," sniffed Beckham. He promptly jetted off to the USA with his family to mull things over.

But that holiday proved to be anything but relaxing. After turning on the TV one day, the 28-year-old was dumbstruck by news that United had seemingly accepted a provisional offer from Barcelona presidential candidate Joan Laporta.

"IF YOU WERE IN THE MEDIA TOO OFTEN, FERGIE WAS ALWAYS A LITTLE BIT EDGIER"

Beckham seethed, but Spanish football journalist Guillem Balague believes that offer was never genuine. "Laporta is a clever man and he was willing to do anything it took to win that presidential election," he tells *FFT*. "He arranged for his friend Pini Zahavi, the super agent, to make that offer to United. The statement clearly outlined that Laporta would need to win the election first – it was a message to voters."

Regardless, Beckham was never interested. If he was going to make a heart-wrenching move away from Old Trafford, there was only one club he'd consider – and luckily for him, they were about to launch a bid of their own.

REALLY WANNABE A MADRIDISTA

On June 18, 2003, the Red Devils announced they'd accepted an offer of £25 million from nine-time European champions Real Madrid, who had been rumoured to be interested since before the past season's Champions League encounter. It mattered relatively little that Los Blancos already had a world-class right-midfielder in their ranks. "If he comes, where's he going to play?" defender Roberto Carlos pondered to *FFT* earlier that year. "We already have Luis Figo."

But the interest was very serious. "David, if you come to Madrid, you won't ever regret it," president Florentino Perez assured him over the phone. Perez had signed Figo from arch rivals Barcelona in 2000 as part of his own presidential campaign, before superstars Zinedine Zidane and Ronaldo joined across the following two summers. For El Presidente, signing the world's best player each summer was never solely about the football.

"His Galacticos idea was built on bringing in the biggest stars in the world," explains Balague. "Bigger stars meant selling more shirts and making more money. Beckham's signing fit into that. It was a sign of power to go to the Premier League and take their biggest name back to Madrid."

After being informed by Kenyon that his relationship with Ferguson was now beyond repair, Beckham made the call to become Perez's latest Galactico.

Thousands of reporters and photographers flocked to the Bernabeu on July 1, the date of Beckham's unveiling. With the No.7 shirt already occupied by Madrid legend Raul, the midfielder plumped for No.23 in homage to basketball legend Michael Jordan. The media frenzy around that minor detail alone was an indication that Perez had made another shrewd marketing decision.

Madrid stars welcomed the move publicly, with Roberto Carlos – now clearly toeing the party line – joking that there'd finally be "two good looking players at the club". For the team's youngsters, it was another exciting summer. "There was a lot of expectation to see him because he was an icon," Antonio Nunez, who played alongside Beckham in the Englishman's first season, reveals to *FFT*. "Of all the Galacticos, he was now the most famous. His wife was a Spice Girl!"

But in purely footballing terms, the new recruit knew that the Galacticos would take some winning round.

"There was initially some scepticism from a few of the stars at the club," says Balague. "There was an element of, 'Who is this David Beckham? Is he good enough to be here?' He wasn't quite at the level of Figo, Ronaldo or Zidane. There was also a language barrier. Only a handful of Real's stars, including Figo, could speak English." So, Beckham joined the club's pre-season tour of the Far East with a massive point to prove. Fortunately, he was willing to roll up his sleeves.

"Doubts about him soon disappeared once he began training with the squad, because he's a humble guy," adds Balague, who got to know the Beckhams well during their spell in Spain. "I know he had his own fears walking into that dressing room, but he won people round during pre-season with his work ethic. It was obvious that he was here to succeed as a footballer."

Indeed, Beckham actually appeared more starstruck than anyone, describing Zidane as











"the best footballer I've ever trained with", marvelling at the "nine different ways" that Ronaldo could control the same pass in training and hailing Raul, "a god in this city".

"We were all surprised by his humility," says Nunez, who'd later play for Liverpool. "You might expect someone so famous to be a bit of a diva. But he was the opposite."

The appointment of a new coach, Carlos Queiroz – who knew Beckham from his time as Ferguson's assistant at Old Trafford – was an added relief for the player. The Portuguese had devised a plan to solve the Figo-Beckham conundrum, which involved playing with no right-winger at all. Instead, they were fielded either side of Zidane in an insanely attacking 5-3-2 formation. Beckham, who had long harboured desires to play more centrally, was thrilled with the setup.

His highly-anticipated competitive debut came at Mallorca in 2003's Supercopa de Espana, a two-legged tussle between the La Liga and Copa del Rey champions. Things didn't go to plan, though: the new man was substituted shortly after half-time in a 2-1 first-leg defeat. The next day, Spanish media mocked his signing.

But Becks responded in steely fashion in the return fixture, slotting home a Ronaldo cross to wrap up a 3-0 win and first trophy in white. As the Bernabeu erupted, and Roberto Carlos hoisted him off the ground with a bear hug, the move to Spain officially sank in. "I'd been so unhappy during my last few months at Old Trafford," he recounted. "Now, I knew I'd done the right thing."

Beckham bagged again just two minutes into his La Liga debut, tapping home another precise Ronaldo cutback against Real Betis as Queiroz's charges got off the mark with a 2-1 victory. For buoyant Madridistas, it was a sign of things to come.

Clockwise from above "Who's going to do the running, then?"; good luck taking Raul's spot, pal; the circus was always in town; Posh and Becks often wanted it to stop right now

FRIENDSHIP NEVER ENDS

Madrid's new No.23 hit five goals, including three free-kicks, in his first 16 appearances to help Los Blancos top La Liga at Christmas. The football was so breathtaking during one 7-2 drubbing of Real Valladolid that Beckham half-wished he could have been sitting in the stands watching instead.

He had now been accepted as a Galactico. "We knew before that he was a good player," said Ronaldo in October 2003. "But we didn't expect him to be such an influential player. He has everyone's respect."

"His work rate particularly stood out," says Balague. "His English style of playing, the running really hard and getting stuck in, was admirable. It's also telling that, despite the team already boasting a number of sublime free-kick takers, Beckham became the main man on set-pieces." ▸

For youngster Nunez, watching Beckham and the other Galacticos training together was unforgettable. "It was a spectacle, as Beckham, Figo, Roberto Carlos and Zidane would practise their free-kicks together after sessions," he tells *FFT*. "They would discuss techniques and advise each other. Beckham was the best, though. Rarely have so many players of such a high level come together."

Despite such talent, Madrid's squad ran out of gas in the second half of the season. Amid pressure for their biggest stars to play every week, tired legs and injuries contributed to shocks both in Europe and domestically: a Champions League quarter-final defeat to Monaco, and fourth-place finish in La Liga. Los Blancos lost their last five games in a row to end a miserable year seven points behind champions Valencia. The white handkerchiefs were out. So was Queiroz.

A promising start in Madrid had ended with a cold dose of reality, but Beckham at least felt like part of the furniture heading into his second term. Unfortunately for him, Real's slump continued.

Queiroz's replacement, ex-Spain boss Jose Antonio Camacho, resigned just three league games into the new season, citing "a lack of support from the players". In a farcical series of events, Camacho's successor, Mariano Garcia Remon, lasted just 101 days himself before being replaced by Brazilian Vanderlei Luxemburgo. He guided an unsettled side to second spot in La Liga, following early exits in both cups. It was another year to forget.

So too was Beckham's third campaign in Spain, even after the huge summer arrivals of Sergio Ramos and Robinho. Club president Perez, the man responsible for Beckham's transfer, also departed midway through the season, eventually being replaced by Ramon Calderon. Luxemburgo got the chop shortly before Christmas, then reserve team boss Juan Ramon Lopez Caro led Real to another runners-up finish – albeit 12 points behind Barça – with Madrid beaten by Arsenal in the Champions League last 16.

"During David's first three seasons at Real, the club made many poor decisions in terms of coaches and players," explains Balague. "Too much emphasis was placed on names and not enough on picking the right people."

Thankfully, things finally changed for the better in Beckham's fourth season, as Italian coach Fabio Capello returned to the club he'd steered to La Liga glory in 1996-97.

Clockwise from below The ice-cool dead balls worth €600m; but a hairstyle slightly less so; a La Liga winner, finally; "How'd that 'last game' thing turn out in the end, Fabio?"

Following Zidane's retirement, Beckham was reunited with Ruud van Nistelrooy from Manchester United, while Ballon d'Or winner-to-be Fabio Cannavaro also arrived. Both proved to be smart buys.

Not that it did much good for Beckham, however, who would be forced to contend with a different face forcing him out of the team. Jose Antonio Reyes, a loan signing from Arsenal, was much quicker than his English team-mate and often preferred on the right of Capello's 4-4-2. Between the middle of September and mid-December, Beckham started one league game, later admitting to "feeling like a spare part". Now 31 and into the final year of his deal, he began to wonder if the dream was over.

He'd made up his mind by mid-January 2007, when Madrid sporting director Predrag Mijatovic announced that Beckham would not be prolonging his stay at the Bernabeu











CALDERON BEMOANED BECKHAM 'GOING TO HOLLYWOOD TO BE A FILM STAR' – LATER, HE ASKED GALAXY TO POSTPONE THE DEAL

beyond the season's end. The following day, Beckham stunned the world by announcing that he'd agreed a preliminary five-year deal with MLS side LA Galaxy.

"Beckham is going to Hollywood to be a film star," huffed irate president Calderon. "We were right not to extend his contract, which has been proved by the fact that no club in the world wanted him except LA." Two days after the Galaxy announcement, Capello publicly stated that Beckham had played his final game for the club. His story at Madrid wasn't going to have its fairytale ending... or so it seemed.

"What happened next is the measure of David Beckham the footballer," says Balague. "Capello was not the type of guy to change his mind. You would have said at this stage that there was no way back."

SHOW ME HOW GOOD YOU ARE

Rather than sulk, though, the England skipper worked tirelessly to try to regain his place. He couldn't hold down a spot on the wing, but he could still run a game from the middle of midfield. Pleased with his "commendable" contributions in training, Capello had relented by mid-February, calling the midfielder back into his squad for a league clash against Real Sociedad. Beckham grabbed his opportunity, equalising with a 30-yard free-kick as Madrid came from behind to win 2-1. He then started at home to Bayern Munich in the Champions League last 16, playing a crucial role in two of three first-half goals as Real prevailed 3-2. Bayern CEO Karl-Heinz Rummenigge labelled his display "world class".

Capello trusted Beckham enough to pick him in the final six La Liga matches he was available for, and was duly rewarded. This time, Madrid went toe-to-toe with Barcelona for the title. "He was undroppable during the run-in," says Balague. "A giant on the field."

Victory in their final game of the campaign, at home to Mallorca, would guarantee Los Blancos the title, thanks to a superior head-to-head record over their Catalan foes. With his wife and family in his private box, joined (obviously) by actors Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes, Becks & Co recovered from 1-0 down to win 3-1. After the final whistle, draped in an England flag, he was treated to a standing ovation by Madridistas.

"Given everything I'd been through that season, winning the league felt as sweet as anything I had achieved," recalled Beckham. "To become a champion of Spain was what I'd dreamt of when I joined the club. It was the perfect way to say goodbye."

So emphatic were the Englishman's final six months at Real that president Calderon even tried convincing LA Galaxy to postpone their arrangement for another season. But Beckham had made up his mind: America called. "He likely would have won so much more without mismanagement higher up at the club during that period," bemoans Balague. "But he left Real a champion. He'd conquered Spain."

Goldenballs had conquered it in more ways than one: it was estimated that his time in the Spanish capital was directly responsible for a €600m increase in the club's revenue. In his final campaign, Real finally surpassed Manchester United as the world's richest club, with commercial revenues of close to €200m per year. On those grounds, some dismiss Beckham's impact at the Bernabeu as a predominantly financial one. Balague disagrees. "Of course, away from the pitch, he had a huge impact," he concedes. "He helped to bring Spanish football to a larger audience than ever before, while Real and Barcelona became clubs that more people paid attention to. El Clasico was watched by millions more.

"But in footballing terms, he was adored by team-mates and supporters because of his hard work, leadership and expertise from free-kicks. Without him forcing his way back into the side in 2007, they probably wouldn't have won the league. That free-kick against Sociedad is still talked about."

Capello lamented the loss of a player he had come to rely on. "We all made mistakes over Beckham," confessed the Italian in the summer of 2007. "It's a shame he's going. He's a great player."

Beckham's fellow Galacticos were also full of it. Figo described him as "a phenomenon"; Roberto Carlos, "a joy". The man himself, meanwhile, dubbed his time at the Bernabeu "among the most beautiful and important spells of my career".

Before flying off to change the face of MLS forever, there was time for one final goodbye, delivered in Spanish to the press. "Thanks to the, erm, six coaches, five presidents and my team-mates," he quipped, before apologising for his poor language skills. *"No es mal, eh?"* ("It wasn't too bad, huh?")

Few who witnessed that trademark run-up beneath the Bernabeu floodlights would describe his time in Madrid as anything less.



JOTA
THE SLOTTER

After an injury-hit season, the Liverpool man struck seven goals in his last nine games to remind everyone how he earned his nickname. He tells *FFT* about his World Cup heartbreak, the time he caused Jurgen Klopp to pull a hamstring, why Cristiano Ronaldo won't challenge him to a game of *FIFA*... and what comes next

Words Chris Flanagan

Diogo Jota didn't anticipate the carnage he'd unleashed in Liverpool's technical area when he bagged a dramatic winner against Tottenham in April.

In the space of the next 10 seconds, not only had the whole of Anfield descended into the kind of fervour borrowed from the Portuguese forward's dreams, but Jurgen Klopp had landed himself in hot water for celebrating angrily in front of the fourth official – and pulled a hamstring in the process. It was a celebration that the Liverpool boss would rather forget, though he could hardly blame Jota for the injury.

"He did, actually!" Jota tells *FourFourTwo* now, laughing as he reveals his manager's tongue-in-cheek reaction. "I can't tell you what he said, but when he saw me the next day, he pointed one finger at me..."

We can probably guess which finger that was. The 26-year-old's own celebration was surprisingly tranquil, considering he'd just ▸

scored in front of the Kop to give Liverpool a 4-3 victory in stoppage time, a minute after Spurs had drawn level having trailed 3-0. It was an occasion he'd craved for years.

"For me, it was a great moment," explains the man that Klopp recruited from Wolves in September 2020. "I did score winners at Anfield in my first season, but there was no crowd. Everybody was telling me, 'Oh, you've just scored a winner in front of the Kop – it would have been amazing if the fans were here'. I needed to wait a couple more years to actually get that feeling. Having that moment was really special – I'll remember it for a long time.

"I didn't even notice the manager injuring himself at the time. When I arrived in the dressing room, I already had a few friends sending me the video link of him pulling his hamstring after my goal. You cannot write a script like that. I think it didn't bother him, because it was a key moment for the team. It's a good story to tell!"

FFT is meeting Jota for a natter at Adidas headquarters in Stockport. We've been invited to speak to him after he's finished filming on one of their indoor pitches, going head-to-head with Liverpool team-mate Luis Diaz, to much hilarity. The pair clearly get along well – before the Colombian wideman moved to Anfield from Porto in January 2022, Jota was actually his landlord.

"Yes, that's true!" chuckles Jota, surprised that we knew. "He rented the house I'd lived in when I played for Porto. He was paying me rent, then he ended up playing with me, and I often still bring that up during our conversations. He arrived in January and had a contract with me until July, but because he was going to be my team-mate, I let him out of the contract!"

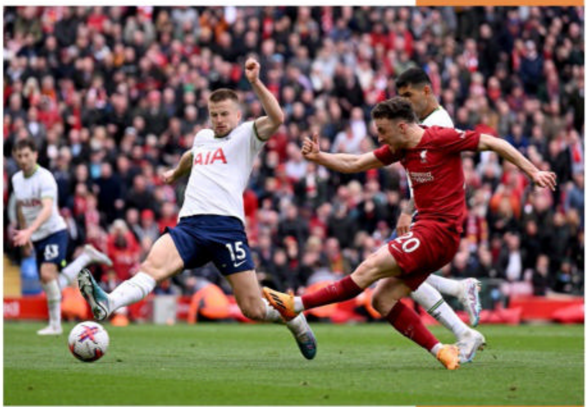
Jota lost some income but gained a friend. The duo have been part of a group of players who like to spend time with each other away from training. "Because of the language, it has mainly been the Brazilian guys such as Bobby Firmino, Fabinho, Alisson and Arthur, and then we have Luis and Darwin Nunez, and Thiago and Adrian, so it's quite a large group," he says (Firmino and Arthur would leave the club soon afterwards). "Our wives and girlfriends all get along. We get together for birthdays and all sorts.

"When Luis arrived in England, he was also really important for us with the energy he brought to the team in the latter stages of that season, when we nearly won everything. Two trophies wasn't bad, but it could have been a story forever."

So much has happened in the 13 months since Jota and Liverpool chased an historic quadruple. This year it was Manchester City battling on four fronts, while the Reds spent most of the campaign languishing some distance below the Premier League's top four, and went out of the Champions League to Real Madrid in the last 16.

In 2021-22, after lifting the League Cup and the FA Cup, they were just two victories from becoming the first English side ever to win all four major trophies in one season, putting







"NOT GOING TO THE WORLD CUP WAS THE HARDEST KNOCK I'VE HAD. I DESERVED TO BE THERE"

even the treble in the shade. Their tally of 92 Premier League points would have won them the title in the two seasons that preceded and followed it – and 20 other Premier League campaigns, in fact. Yet City pipped them by a point, recovering from being 2-0 down with 15 minutes remaining to beat Aston Villa 3-2 on the final day. Less than a week later, Real Madrid defeated Liverpool in the Champions League final at the Stade de France.

The Merseysiders had plenty to be proud of, but Jota looks back on the season wondering what might have been. "It's a mixed feeling," he admits, "because it was the last feeling, and the last games are normally what stick in people's minds. We were so close – we were 15 minutes away from winning the Premier League. And I really think that if we had won the Premier League, we would have won the Champions League.

"I came off in our last game of the season, at home to Wolves, and we were asking how City were doing. They went 2-0 down to Villa and you instantly think, 'We're already in the second half and they're 2-0 down – it'll be hard for them'. Credit to them for turning it around, but that was hard to take.

"Then we needed to focus, because we still had a Champions League final to play. I think we were really unlucky in that game, given the number of opportunities we had. Thibaut Courtois had one of those nights and things didn't go our way. We'd already won two trophies, which were important, but those 15 minutes, those small things – if they change, I think we could have written football history, especially English football."

Within a month of that Champions League final defeat in Paris, Jota picked up a thigh problem that set off an unwanted chain of events, hampering his 2022-23 campaign.

"It was a very hard season for me – I ended the previous one in the national team with an injury in the final game," he recalls, referring to a series of Nations League fixtures with Portugal last summer that took their toll.

"So, I started pre-season injured. I came back but got injured again during pre-season. I came back again and started playing a few games, then suffered a big injury in October, probably because my pre-season wasn't what it normally is. It was the biggest injury of my career."

Stretchered off with a serious calf injury in the final minutes of a home win against Manchester City, he instantly feared what it would mean. "When you feel something like I did, and you go off on a stretcher, it doesn't look too good," he reflects. "You still have hope that it's not serious. Because we were so close to the World Cup, I was just hoping that I could recover in time.

"When I was told that I wouldn't, and that I couldn't go to the World Cup, that was the hardest knock I've had in my career. Just... sadness. I had the opportunity to play my first World Cup and I knew I was playing an important role for the national team – I'd played a big role in qualification, so I felt like I deserved to be there. But I couldn't be."

His colleagues at Liverpool did their best to console him, as did Klopp. "The next day, he gave me a proper hug," says Jota. "He knew that, at that moment, there wasn't much to say – he was just trying to comfort me. And during my rehabilitation, he'd ask how things were going every time he saw me. You notice that he cares. That's all you can ask for: that the person in charge of the team cares about all of the players, and demonstrates that he's counting on you whenever you're back."

Jota did head to Qatar to watch one World Cup match. "Liverpool had a training camp



in Dubai in December, so it wasn't far, and I went to Portugal's last group game against South Korea," he says. "We lost, so I said, 'I'm not coming back!' I probably wasn't a lucky charm. I was there supporting the team, but I also wanted to be playing. Then, seeing the team struggling to score against Morocco in the quarter-final, you know you could make an impact, but you can't."

When Jota returned to action in February, Liverpool sat 10th in the table. A transitional campaign had seen Sadio Mané depart and Darwin Nunez show signs of promise without being prolific, while Luis Diaz suffered his own six-month layoff and January recruit Cody Gakpo was, at that point, still finding his feet.

Things had gone similarly awry during Jota's lengthy injury absence in his first season at Anfield. In 2020-21, he returned with the club sixth in the table, and helped them to finish third. This time, even though he didn't score in his first 11 games after coming back, the Reds lost only two of their final 18 league matches and climbed to fifth.

"I'm certainly more of a lucky charm in that situation!" he says, smiling. "When I'm on the pitch, I feel I can be important. I wasn't scoring at first, but I was getting assists which gave me confidence. If I'm scoring, though, I'm helping more."

Jota's final nine appearances of the season delivered seven goals, including braces in a 6-1 thrashing at Leeds, 3-2 win at home to Nottingham Forest and 4-4 final-day draw at Southampton. According to the man himself, changing his boots played a role. From that Elland Road romp onwards, he wore Adidas' snazzy orange X Speedportal footwear, part of their recently-released Heatspawn Pack.

"I never scored with the previous boots and it's a psychological thing if you're a striker – 'maybe it's the boots I need to change'," he says. "Then you score and everything feels fine. They're just tools, but when you look at them, they give you different feelings."

Not that he allows superstition to have free rein. "I try not to, because it gives you a lot of work to have everything always the same," he says, with emphasis. "Then, if one of those things doesn't happen for whatever reason, you're already 1-0 down. But if the boots feel nice and you're scoring... I remember Karim Benzema wearing the same ones – it's hard to argue when you're scoring."

Jota's goal against Spurs gave him a chance to air his video game celebration: sitting on the turf, pretending to hold a controller. He's long been a huge *FIFA* enthusiast – he has his own eSports team, Diogo Jota eSports, and can give a seriously tough test for those on his team who play it for a living. In 2021, he was briefly ranked world No.1 on *FIFA*'s ▸

Clockwise from above EA Sports – it's, literally, in the game; "The biggest injury in my career"; his late, late winner sent Klopp into ranting rapture; is that joy, pain, or a bit of both?

Ultimate Team Champions leaderboard, after winning 30 matches in a row.

"I often get involved in competitions with the professional *FIFA* players, which happen once or twice a month, and I do win some games," he tells *FFT* with a grin. "I have an eSports team and sometimes I do better than my own players – not because they're bad, but because I can actually compete with them! That feels really nice – when you can compete with people who only do that for a living."

Understandably, then, there isn't a long list of Reds team-mates queuing up to try to beat him. "I don't think there is, to be honest," he reveals. "I played Trent Alexander-Arnold in the final in the ePremier League Invitational during lockdown; I was representing Wolves back then and he was representing Liverpool, and I beat him. He doesn't play that often nowadays, so I don't think there's a guy who could beat me!"

And with the national team, has he ever taken on Cristiano Ronaldo at *FIFA*? "I don't think Ronaldo is a fan of video games," he chuckles. One suspects that if CR7 thought there was a chance of defeat, he would avoid playing at all. "Yeah, exactly!" laughs Jota. "He's very competitive."

Jota's focus now is on taking Liverpool back to the top after a difficult season. There will be no Champions League football in 2023-24 – the Reds will be in the Europa League for the first time in eight years, but that doesn't mean they won't take it seriously. "I played in the Europa League before with Wolves," continues Jota. "Although the fans are used to playing in the Champions League every single year and it will feel like a downgrade, it's still a prestigious competition. We'll give our best to win it."

It should at least mean they avoid Real Madrid, their Champions League conquerors in each of the past three seasons. "Well, they can somehow finish third in their group and still be in our way..." says Jota. "Since I came to Liverpool, I've always got knocked out by Real Madrid, so hopefully they're not there."

In the Premier League, the Reds will hope that a more settled forward line can help them to challenge again. Jota believes that, despite a difficult 12 months, Liverpool can push for the title in 2023-24. "Yes, I hope so," he declares. "In the last few years, we have always been there – three seasons with over 90 points, which is incredible. Not to win the league with so many points is even more incredible. So, I think our target needs to be that: to do better than the season we've just had, for sure, and be fighting for titles.

"I PLAY AGAINST PROFESSIONAL *FIFA* PLAYERS, AND I DO WIN SOME GAMES..."





"You always need to refresh the squad with new players. That's what we've done, and if we stick together for a long time, things will get better. In the season we've just had, we weren't there – it's the truth – but hopefully that was hitting the bottom and we can bounce back and try to fight for titles again."

For Jota himself, a full season on the pitch is his first aim. When he did that in 2021-22, Liverpool challenged for every honour going, earning him a new long-term deal after he scored 21 goals in all competitions. "I hope that I can score that number or more," he says now. "The season before last was very successful – almost the most successful ever in English football – and for me it was great as well. I was so happy that Liverpool offered me a new deal and I could commit myself to the club for a long period of time.

"I know they trust me and that's important: to know that you're in a stable place, with people who give you the confidence to go out on to the pitch and produce excellent performances. This summer, I want to get through a proper pre-season, then hopefully have a great season."

If he does, he'll give Jurgen Klopp plenty more reasons to celebrate on the Anfield touchline in 2023-24. Just look out for that hamstring, gaffer.

Jota wears the adidas X Speedportal boots as part of the Heatspawn Pack, available to buy now at adidas.co.uk/heatspawn_pack



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THE CUP FINAL THAT NO ONE WANTED





The Greek Cup has become so venomous that Serbia, Australia and even Selhurst Park were sounded out in a desperate quest to find a venue for this year's final. *FFT* went to find out why, and see AEK Athens triumph

Words Alec McQuarrie

> "Be very careful when you go there,"

a hotelier tells *FourFourTwo* on the morning of the 2023 Greek Cup Final. Ordinarily, this warning would not come as a surprise. For at least 60 years, the end-of-season showpiece has more closely resembled a street riot than a football match. But not this time, surely.

In the 1962 final between eternal enemies Panathinaikos and Olympiacos, supporters – convinced the match was rigged – hurled bottles and flares on to the pitch and delayed the first half by 21 minutes. When the Swiss referee blew to abandon proceedings seven minutes into extra time, with the score still at 0-0 and darkness enveloping the stadium, thousands of spectators stormed the playing surface. There were no floodlights back then, nor penalty shootouts. Fans believed that organisers had succeeded in taking the final to a lucrative replay. But the replay never came and a champion was never announced.

"There's a saying in Greek football: either you win, or the game is postponed," says SPORT24's editor-in-chief Themis Kessaris with a wry smile, acknowledging that things are much the same six decades later.

Italian referee Davide Massa learned that the hard way this April. Foreign referees are regularly brought in to oversee derby games nowadays, to avoid incidents such as the one in 2014, when Greek official Christoforos Zografos was hospitalised by an attack from two masked men wielding iron bars. Massa, then, can count himself lucky to escape with just a quick kick to the crotch as Olympiacos lost 3-1 at home to AEK Athens. In honour of a long-standing tradition, fans threw bottles and footballs on to the pitch when the result became clear. Even Evangelos Marinakis, the owner of Olympiacos (and Nottingham Forest), was filmed kicking a ball into play.

As in 1962, a pitch invasion ensued, and Massa called a premature halt to the match in stoppage time. Yet his swift exit down the tunnel evidently wasn't swift enough, as was made clear in his match report: somebody caught up with him and exacted retribution in the direction of his nether regions.

However, there's little danger of this year's Greek Cup final being abandoned with crowd trouble – because there isn't a crowd at all.

IT COULD BE SOSNOWIEC, OR ANYWHERE...

That the match is happening at all is a minor miracle. Decades of violence surrounding the fixture have put off almost every suitable host, and a handful of unsuitable ones. This season's glorious event evolved into an epic farce of continental proportions.

First, the Hellenic Football Federation (HFF) explored the possibility of holding the final in England, Germany or even Australia. In February, Crystal Palace's Selhurst Park was the frontrunner. Then, six weeks before the final, the federation proudly proclaimed that the Cypriot city of Nicosia had 'won' the race to stage the prestigious game. Only, no one had thought to ask the Cypriot police, and they were less than enamoured by the idea of thousands of Greek ultras congregating in a capital city that's quite precariously divided already. It quickly became clear that Nicosia wouldn't be hosting after all.

The next natural candidate was Athens' 75,000-seater Olympic Stadium. But the organisers and the venue had been burned too many times in the past – the latter, quite literally. That included in 2018, when PAOK claimed the second of their three consecutive Greek Cup final wins over AEK, all of them marred by clashes between fans and police.

Last season, there was more violence when Panathinaikos beat PAOK at the same venue, despite capacity being reduced to 43,000 in an attempt to keep each group of supporters apart. It didn't entirely work. Both sets of fans spilled on to the pitchside running track in an attempt to get at their rivals, and the game was also halted for 35 minutes when PAOK supporters hurled a chunk of cement at Spanish winger Aitor, who had just scored what turned out to be the winning goal.

After that match and the ensuing damage to the venue, the Olympic Stadium's board of directors accused the HFF of having unpaid debts. With this year's cup final scheduled to take place just days after national elections, holding the match in Athens was a recipe for disaster, and wisely avoided.

Attention swiftly turned to Volos and the Panthessaliko Stadium – the HFF's original choice, which had hosted the 2020 final after police had refused to stage it at the 14,000-capacity Georgios Kamaras Stadium in Athens, fearing problems outside the venue, even though the match was behind closed doors anyway due to COVID. Given that Volos last hosted a cup final featuring a crowd in 2017, and it descended into inevitable clashes between PAOK and AEK fans both inside and outside the stadium, the mayor of the central Greek city reached an agreement with the HFF that they would host this year's match only on the condition that it would be held behind closed doors. Cue another official announcement, putting the matter to bed once and for all.

Or, as it would transpire, once and for a few hours. That same day, a passive-aggressive statement from the stadium's managing committee made it patently clear that there would be no final at their ground. They, too, had not been consulted. Once again, the final packed its bags and hit the road.

At least a date for the big showdown had eventually been settled by this point, 27 days before the event. But where it was going to be held, and whether fans would be present, was still anyone's guess.

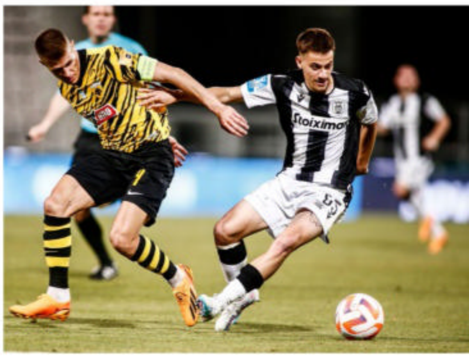
With just 13 days to go until the 2023 Greek Cup Final, the HFF still hadn't found a venue. Larissa's fire department made plain their objections; Volos and Cyprus reiterated their refusals; Agrinio and Istanbul both said no. Things were getting desperate. Tirana (the capital of Albania), Bucharest (Romania) and Belgrade (Serbia) were all contacted, as was Sosnowiec, Poland's 14th-largest city. In the end, the Panthessaliko Stadium caved and agreed that Volos would play host, as long as strict measures were put in place to prevent fans from travelling to the city.

Greek football's shambolic organisation and excruciating bureaucracy have been ridiculed in the media for years, so the saga didn't shock anyone who knows the country well. But this particular series of events was laughably absurd, even by Greek standards.

"It's become a touring troupe that no one wants," lamented SPORT24 journalist Nikos Syriodis after the final was first turned away from Cyprus in April. "In which other country are decisions made, and announcements

> "THERE'S A SAYING IN GREEK FOOTBALL: EITHER YOU WIN, OR THE GAME IS POSTPONED"

Right No fans, no bother, for AEK this year **Far right** Last year's Greek Cup final was hardly the first to see crowd violence







made, which you know deep down may not happen? Everything is possible now; nothing should surprise us. We're talking about Greek football here. If we took the final to another planet, the aliens would say no."

In the aliens' defence, Greek ultras would find a way to be there. When a 2-1 comeback win over Aris in Thessaloniki all but wrapped up AEK's second title in 29 years in early May, more than 7,000 fans travelled to the airport at 3.30am on a Monday morning to hail the team's arrival with flares and firecrackers.

THE FALL AND RISE OF AEK ATHENS

This campaign's Greek Cup final would give AEK Athens the chance to clinch their first double since 1978. They would once again face PAOK, in a repeat of the fixture that had spiralled into violence several times before.

FFT are in Volos, but watertight restrictions ensure that both sets of supporters aren't. And yet there are still sightings of groups of PAOK fans gathering in hillside villages, calling friends to warn them about the police checkpoints ahead.

Inside the Panthessaliko Stadium, blue lights from a police blockade can be seen flashing over the tops of the stands. A banner draped across empty seats reads: 'Football is celebration, not violence'. With supporters absent, it feels as if this final has neither.

It's a deflating denouement to a Greek season that had everything. In a pulsating title race, AEK and Panathinaikos – once supreme forces, until Olympiacos put the division in a quarter-century stranglehold – pushed each other all the way.

As the campaign approached its halfway stage, an unbeaten Panathinaikos held a seven-point advantage over their Athenian rivals. In total, they led the standings after all but five matchdays, seeking a first league crown since 2010. That triumph had been followed by financial problems and the resignation of the club's entire board, after a riot in a 2012 derby with Olympiacos; in the wilderness years that ensued, the Greens came as low as 11th – in a 16-team league – in 2018, while AEK were celebrating the title. Now the tables had turned.

Crucially, AEK went undefeated against the rest of the top six in the 10-game end-of-season play-off round. Having finished two points behind Panathinaikos in the 26-fixture regular season, they subsequently overtook the leaders and cantered to the championship by five points. Few of their fans have bothered to risk the trip to Volos for the cup final, however; instead, they've massed in their thousands outside their new Agia Sophia Stadium in Athens, turning night into day with an obligatory sea of flares.

The state-of-the-art 32,500-seater ground, constructed on the site of their beloved and long-since-demolished Nikos Goumas Stadium, has been a revelation for the club. They've won 17 of 20 matches played there, keeping 16 clean sheets in the process. "It's the best thing that has happened in Greek football in decades: to see them so happy," says SPORT24 editor Kessaris. "It's not even about the new stadium. It's about returning to their roots – to the exact spot."

After leaving in 2003, they'd spent nearly two decades playing their home games at the Olympic Stadium. The design of their new home, completed in September 2022, was inspired by the Hagia Sophia cathedral in Istanbul, once known as Constantinople. AEK – Athlitiki Enosis Konstantinoupoleos, which translates as the Athletic Union of Constantinople – were formed by ethnic Greek refugees forced to leave the Bosphorus city, by then part of Turkey, in 1923. All but one gate at the new stadium is named after a historical Greek city in Asia Minor.

Under Argentine coach Matias Almeyda, a cosmopolitan squad of 18 nationalities has thrived in fresh surroundings. Croatian World Cup finalist Domagoj Vida presided over a defence that let in just 17 league goals all season. AEK's success is down to a collective, rather than the individual brilliance behind Olympiacos walking the league in each of the past three seasons, finishing 22, 26 and then 19 points ahead of second. "It's not just the stadium that has got the fans crazy; it's what we saw – something I haven't seen in about 15 years," says AEK fan Vaggelis, who prefers not to give *FFT* his full name, in the interest of safety. Such is the world of Greek football. ▶



AEK have always prided themselves on playing the most attractive football, even if their trophy cabinet never bulged like those of Panathinaikos and Olympiacos. After their triumph in 2018 ended a 24-year wait for the title, their style of play became compromised as the club focused resources on building the Agia Sophia. This season, though, they've been unplayable, thanks to Almeyda's brand of high-pressing, aggressive, direct football.

"Almeyda is a miracle," enthuses Vaggelis. "In the beginning, when we saw a different formation – 3-5-2 - we were like, 'What the f**k is he doing?' No one was expecting the league title, especially in his first year. But he managed to do something we haven't seen in many years. This is a team that can go and chase things and get big wins in Europe. We've watched something unique. We've watched something that has a great future."

A DOUBLE WITH A DIFFERENCE

As recently as 2013, AEK's prospects were in tatters. If Panathinaikos' decline was bad, at least they weren't liquidated, before reforming as a third-tier amateur outfit. President Andreas Dimitrelos was arrested for €170 million worth of taxes owed. The club's first ever relegation had been coming: "AEK had financial troubles for almost as long as I can remember," reflects Vaggelis.

Demis Nikolaidis – legendary goal-getter, subsequent president – stepped up to clear the growing debt in 2008, but was driven out by the club's ultras. Nikolaidis had promised to hand out bans and co-operated with the authorities to identify troublemakers – an unforgivable act in the eyes of Gate 21. "I've met a lot of Gate 21 ultras," says Vaggelis. "But I never felt like joining in when I was growing up because there were so many drugs, and you didn't support the team – you supported something else. Fans became soldiers, like the mafia guys. If you were in Piraeus, they'd go and sell you protection."

"AT THE START, WE WERE LIKE, 'WHAT THE F**K IS HE DOING?' BUT ALMEYDA IS A MIRACLE"

In Volos, at the cup final, AEK's ultras are nowhere to be seen. It's maybe just as well, because after six minutes, defender Lazaros Rota is shown a straight red card by German referee Felix Brych – who officiated the 2017 Champions League Final – for a professional foul on PAOK's former Shakhtar Donetsk star, Taison. There's dismay among AEK's players, but things don't spill over any further. Against all odds, they go on to win the match and clinch the double anyway, triumphing 2-0 with goals from Cameroon defender Harold Moukoudi and Spanish ex-Manchester City youngster Paolo Fernandes, despite playing the remaining 84 minutes with 10 men.

At the Agia Sophia Stadium in Athens, watching fans light flares in joy; inside the Panthessaliko Stadium in Volos, the only noise is the chants of celebration from the substitutes and backroom staff. After three straight cup final defeats to PAOK from 2017 to 2019, this victory is the perfect revenge.

An eerie trophy lift follows, in front of the deserted stands. It's not exactly how AEK envisaged their first double in 45 years, but they aren't present to complain. In Greece, either you win, or the game is postponed. This time, the cup final concluded without incident. For AEK, it was finally time to win.

Clockwise from below right The miracle worker, Matias Almeyda; viva la Vida; not pictured: empty seats all around

CYPRUS' CONTROVERSIAL NEW CHAMPS

AEK returned to the summit of Greek football in 2023. In nearby Cyprus, Aris Limassol climbed to the very top for the first time in their history.

The club known as 'The Light Brigade' had never come higher than fourth in the Cypriot top flight. In their 93-year existence, their greatest success was finishing as Cypriot Cup runners-up in 1989. Between 1997 and 2015, they became football's ultimate yo-yo club: in all but one season, they were either relegated from the top tier or promoted back there again – nine relegations and nine promotions in just 19 campaigns.

However, bankrolled by Belarusian money and boosted by the loan signing of former Russia international forward Aleksandr Kokorin from Fiorentina, Aris Limassol romped to the title in May amid controversy, as some people in Cyprus condemned their links to Russia.

Previously, they had crowds under 300. Now, with Belarusian manager Aleksey Shpilevsky and English midfielder Morgan Brown – signed from Stratford Town in the Southern League – they're ready to face European foes in Limassol's shiny new Alphamega Stadium, in the Champions League qualifying rounds. Arise, Aris.

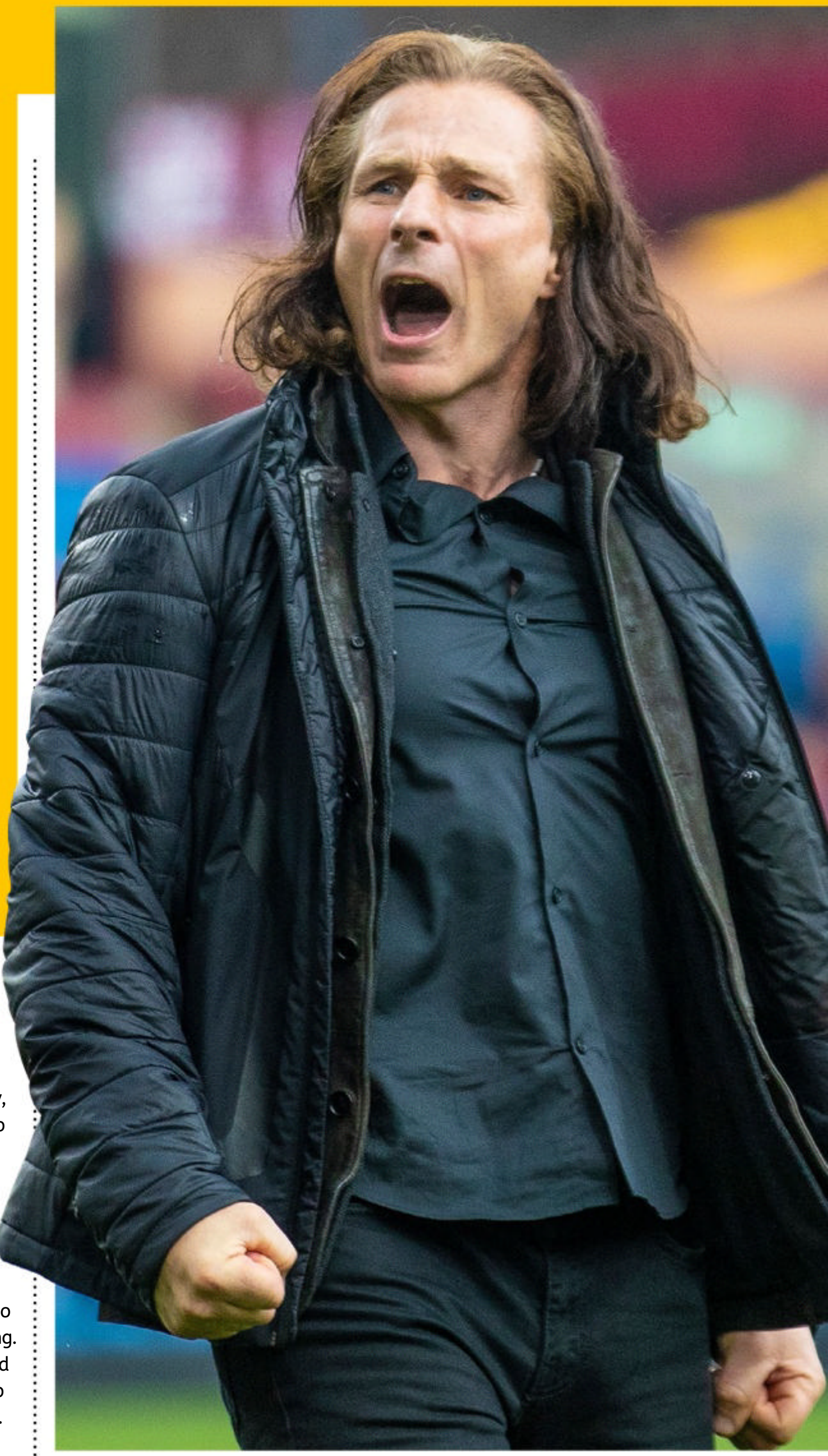






AROUND THE GROUNDS

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INTERVIEW

GARETH AINSWORTH

The rock-loving QPR gaffer on The Doors, his goodbyes to Wycombe and why the haka can be such a valuable tool

Interview Ed McCambridge

In February, you departed Wycombe Wanderers after a decade in charge there. Just how tough was it for you to say goodbye?
Unbelievably tough, and the reason was all of the players and the people there. We had spent 10 years building something and, by the time I moved on, we had become a real family. You had to be a really special person to be allowed to come in and join what we had. Everything just fell into place over the years. We had an underdog tag. We didn't have the money but that always suited me down to the ground, because humility is one of my crucial values in life. We created a culture out of that and built the squad on those values. I made a very tearful farewell speech to the boys, which got leaked on social media – believe me, those tears were genuine. To leave that set of people and the moments we had together was the most difficult thing.

You'd had offers in the past to leave Wycombe but chose to stay – what was different about QPR?
People said I had a job for life at Wycombe – which is lovely, obviously, but that's not everything. I wanted to challenge myself again. The burning question in me has always been, 'Can I possibly manage at the highest level?' To be honest, I don't know if I can. I've no idea how someone like me would fare at the top level. So, I made the step to challenge myself as much as anything. I had good times here as a player and as a young coach – now the task is to make more memories as a manager.

What are your memories of being QPR's caretaker manager a couple of times during the Flavio Briatore era?
I was club captain, the squad's oldest pro, and working as a player-coach with a view to doing my badges. When Iain Dowie was sacked just 12 games into the [2008-09] season, Flavio said, "Gary, I want you to take charge". He was always getting my name wrong. Working for Flavio wasn't easy. He was constantly attempting to interfere. That period at the club was absolute chaos and it taught me that I was nowhere near ready for football management yet. That's how the move to Wycombe, initially as a player, came about.

This time, you took over with QPR in 17th, then lost six of your first seven matches. How tough was that start?
I knew that I wouldn't have been given the job if things were rosy at the club, so when I came in it was a real whirlwind. We had 12 matches to go and then, a few matches in, we got smashed 6-1 by Blackpool and I could sense there was a little bit of panic setting in. A lot of people were probably saying, "Is this the right man for the job?" But I knew that I'd been brought in as I have a connection with this club and its supporters. It was a case of trying to get those people on board, and that's never easy.

> "THE PLAYERS TAKING THE PISS OUT OF THE HAKA TOLD ME MORE ABOUT THEMSELVES"

Was there ever a stage when you wondered if you had made a mistake in leaving Wycombe?
We had just won five on the spin in League One when I made the decision to leave, so naturally a lot of people have asked me if I made a mistake. I genuinely haven't. I'm not someone who has regrets. My focus is just on getting this club back where it belongs. Listen, this club's issues aren't going to be fixed overnight – supporters need to understand there are some tough times ahead – but I know I've made the correct decision in coming here.

Your biggest result was a 2-1 win away at runaway champions Burnley in April. As a Blackburn supporter, that must have been extra special?
I went to school in a town between Blackburn and Burnley, so there was

a big split in the playground in terms of loyalties. It was fantastic for us, as Burnley were always the lower side back then. But it flipped about 10 years ago and, since then, we've always been chasing Burnley. They had a brilliant season last year, which made our win extra special. All the Burnley fans were chanting, "You'll always be a bastard!" at me at the end, which did make me chuckle. I knew we'd just secured an important win, but also that Blackburn supporters at home would be smiling at the result, too. It was an awesome moment for me, personally, and that win really put the belief in us that we could go on and survive the drop. We kicked on from there.

Not long after you arrived at Loftus Road, you brought in a Maori dancer to perform for the squad. Some of the players seemed a little unsure. What was the thinking behind that?
People have got their own views on that type of thing, but I met Bruce Simpson – the Maori man – previously and he told me the story of the dance and what it means to people, and it's such a powerful message. People see the All Blacks doing it, but they don't really know what it's about. They think it's an aggressive dance – it's not. It's about respect. Bruce taught me all about it and I was totally blown away. The All Blacks are from a tiny nation of around four million people, yet they're one of the most successful teams in the world. The reason I brought Bruce in at QPR wasn't actually to see who would embrace it, but who *wouldn't* embrace it. The players who sort of took the piss out of it or were laughing at the back told me much more about themselves than the ones who gave it everything. It proved a very valuable tool for me.

You're a football man, of course, but everyone knows you as a rock 'n' roll fan first and foremost. Tell us what's the greatest rock album of all time?
Oh my god, what a question to finish with! Right, I have an all-time favourite band, so that needs mentioning before we get to the best album. I am such a massive fan of Jim Morrison and The Doors. I was a teenager when the 1991 documentary about The Doors came out and I was blown away. So, anything by The Doors is basically my idea of heaven. But if I'm just choosing a single album and I'm in a real rock and roll mood, I'd actually have to go for a different band. In 1987, I went to my local record shop in Blackburn and picked up a vinyl copy of Guns N' Roses' *Appetite For Destruction*. Wow, I couldn't believe what I was hearing. It's still one I reach for to get the blood pumping, and I have to put that down as my all-time No.1 album.

EFL NEWS

MEMOIRS OF A KIT MAN

Garry Grey had his gran to thank for spending his life decking out superstar footballers at Fulham and Chelsea – and it prepared him for being an agent

Garry Grey has won more medals than most top-flight footballers. Not bad for a kit man.

Through his roles at Fulham and Chelsea, Grey has spent all of his adulthood rubbing shoulders with world-beating footballers and managers. Working under the likes of Kevin Keegan, Jose Mourinho and Carlo Ancelotti, Grey has insight that would make a young coach envious.

"It all started at Fulham when I was 16," he tells *FourFourTwo*. "My nan wrote to ask for work experience, and in the end I stayed for 11 years. I saw the growth of Fulham all the way to the Premier League."

The life of a kit man can be tough. Grey would work 12-hour days, six days per week, dealing with players' needs and thousands of pieces of match gear. "The biggest thing about it is organisation – you're basically looking after 30 kids," he laughs. "You have to do everything for them."

Mistakes in his game can be costly. "When Clint Dempsey came over from America to Fulham in 2007, he was one of the first players to have special insoles," recalls Grey, "and in one of his first away games, I forgot them. He said that he couldn't play without them. The physio had to make new insoles with some sort of tape and foam. He played in those."

Ahead of the 2009-10 season, Grey switched from Fulham to neighbours Chelsea. "I remember my first day," he says. "I walked into the dressing room and in front of me were Michael Ballack, John Terry, Didier Drogba and Frank Lampard. Then Ancelotti walked in. I was like, 'Wow!'"

> "YOU'RE BASICALLY LOOKING AFTER 30 KIDS – YOU'VE GOT TO DO EVERYTHING FOR THEM"

Chelsea's 2012 Champions League Final win against Bayern Munich, in Munich, stands out as a special moment. "It was one of the best days of my life," says Grey. "No one could sleep, so everyone was up at the crack of dawn, had breakfast, then we went up to the roof terrace. It was one of the most relaxed atmospheres I'd ever seen before a football match.

"I just thought to myself, 'They are going to win this'. The lads had such a good feel about them that day."

Grey was bang on: Chelsea won on penalties. "When Didier netted the winning kick it was unbelievable – I still have his shirt, actually."

Grey has winners' medals from the Champions League, Premier League and FA Cup. "Not bad for laying the kit out, is it?" he smiles. "Aaron Hughes and Chris Baird joke that I've won more than them put together."

Now a fully-licensed football agent, Grey has his kit man days to thank for a stunning contacts book. Grinning, he reveals, "I probably have better contacts from being a kit man than some agents at big companies."

Dean Jones



BEST & WORST

STOKE CITY

Daniel Buxton from Potters podcast *Every Step Along The Way* on Pulis, Bojan and some light strangulation



XI

BEST: Asmir Begovic, Mikael Hansson, Syarhey Shtaniuk, Ryan Shawcross, Andy Griffin (the first time), Glenn Whelan, Steven Nzonzi, Xherdan Shaqiri, Bojan Krkic, Marko Arnautovic, Ricardo Fuller.

WORST: Jakob Haugaard, Cuco Martina, Paul Williams, Kevin Wimmer, Ibrahima Sonko, Marlon Broomes, Wilson Palacios, Giannelli Imbula, Jesé, Saido Berahino, Brek Shea.

PLAYER

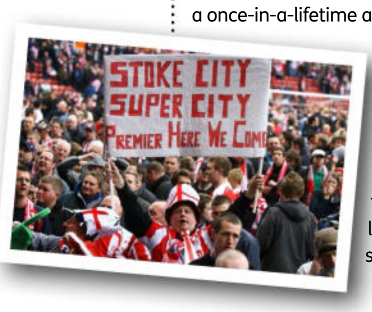
B: Bojan, Arnautovic and Shaqiri were outstanding on their day, but I have a real sweet spot for Steven Nzonzi [right] – a snip at £3 million who could control games with a calmness we just weren't used to. Tony Pulis can't have been too familiar with that, either.

W: Wimmer wasn't as technically poor as others, but we did decide to spend a club-record £18.5m on him to find out that he was overweight and slow. He even had the temerity to blame the club's canteen for his weight issues.

MOMENT

B: The final whistle in the goalless draw with Leicester in May 2008 that took us to the Premier League [below]. I never thought I'd see Stoke in the top flight and, typically, we did it with a 0-0 bore draw.

W: Marko van Ginkel hitting the post at the end of extra time in the League Cup semi-final in 2016 [in the second leg, away to Liverpool]. We lost on penalties and it seemed to be the trigger for a steep decline, after so many years on an upward trajectory. I'm forever wondering what might have been had that gone in.



GAME

B: The 6-1 win over Liverpool in Steven Gerrard's final game was wonderful, but to win an FA Cup semi-final 5-0 at Wembley – against Bolton in 2017 - is a once-in-a-lifetime achievement.

W: The protests after losing 7-0 at home to Birmingham in 1998 made that battering worse than any of our later top-flight shellackings.

GOAL

B: Peter Crouch's volley against Man City was fantastic but, for the occasion, it's Fuller's goal against Aston Villa in our first home Premier League game – an incredible bit of skill, summed up by Dean Sturridge: "If Bergkamp did that, we'd be talking about it for years!"

W: There are no bad goals at Stoke.

SEASON

B: The 2008-09 campaign was our first in the top flight for 23 years, and the atmosphere and togetherness was brilliant. We stayed up easily despite Paddy Power paying out on us to go down on the opening day.

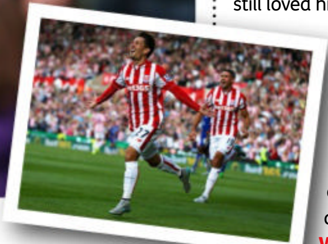
W: Relegation in 2017-18: an A-Z of what can go wrong at a club.

HARD MAN

B: It just has to be the double act of Robert Huth and Ryan Shawcross.

W: Gerry Taggart could barely move, but he did summon the brute force to strangle Dennis Wise once.

CULT HERO



B: Bojan [below left] was a gem on the pitch and a diamond off it. Unfortunately his career took a nosedive after a knee injury at Rochdale in the cup.

W: Ade Akinbiyi was a machine but his ability didn't match his physique. We still loved him. "Ade's gonna get ya!"

OWNER

B: Peter Coates II (AKA Bet365) transformed the club on and off the pitch and gave us memories we could never have dreamt of.

W: Peter Coates I. He didn't have the funds to run the club, but nobody else would take it on. We lurched from one crisis to another until he amazingly got an Icelandic consortium to buy the club in a deal which still baffles number crunchers.

MANAGER

B: Tony Pulis [below] rescued us from relegation to League One, then led us to the Premier League, an FA Cup final and the Europa League knockout stages. He's a true living legend.

W: Paul Lambert was a nice guy, but from the moment he said he didn't care if he was Stoke's "50th choice or first choice", we knew we were going down.





THE GAME'S GONE

ARBROATH 36-0 BON ACCORD, 1885

Gayfield's iconic Scottish Cup gubbing, not helped by having a gas-fitter in goal

It has been mythologised that Bon Accord weren't actually a football team at all. One legend even claims that their invitation to compete in the Scottish Cup dropped on to the doormat of Orion Cricket Club and the accidental recipients fancied a crack; that they left their bats at home to take up the offer and the rest is history.

The story would be fitting if true, given the cricket score that followed, but these kinds of conspiracies tend to surface in the aftermath of freak results. In truth, Bon Accord were a genuine football outfit formed in 1884, a year before Orion FC were registered as a team in their own right. Also without doubt is that those present that day at Gayfield Park (pictured, somewhat later) witnessed a slice of history.

Bon Accord were a ramshackle bunch, arriving without so much as a kit to wear. Nine players turned up; not one of them was a goalkeeper. Andrew Lornie – a gas-fitter by trade – drew the short straw, while the two vacant members of their starting line-up were reportedly filled by spectators from the crowd.

High-scoring matches were common in Victorian times, but this took the biscuit. Arbroath raced into a 15-0 lead by half-time, as teenager John Petrie ran rings around the opposition. Even referee Dave Stormont struggled to keep up, chalking off as many as seven goals in 90 minutes for Arbroath. "So quickly did the Maroons carry the ball from midfield, and so close and rapid was their passing, that it was doubtful whether they could be on- or offside," he later confessed.

In a time before even nets, let alone VAR, onlookers soon began to question the urgency with which the bruised Bonnies were retrieving the ball ready to restart their torment. Meanwhile, Arbroath keeper Jim 'Auld' Milne Sr borrowed an umbrella from the crowd to keep himself dry. He didn't have to put it down once.

Yet, incredibly, a record lasting more than 100 years could have been topped that very afternoon – and less than 20 miles from the Arbroath massacre. In that match, the referee counted 37 Dundee Harp goals against Aberdeen Rovers, only to later accept the club secretary's word that there had been 'just' 35. Unbeknown to the both of them, their rivals down the road would pip them to the record by a single goal. History might have been rewritten had different accounts been trusted.



Whatever the case, Arbroath held on to the record for the largest margin of victory by any football team until 2002, when Madagascan outfit AS Adema eased past SO l'Emyrne 149-0. Adema's foes that day deliberately threw in the towel as part of a pre-planned protest. Bon Accord, 117 years earlier, had no such excuse to fall back on.

Mark White

CLAIMS TO FAME
BOSTON UNITED

1 HUMBLE BEGINNINGS
Howard Wilkinson led Leeds to the final top-flight title before the Premier League launched, but he began his managerial career with the Pilgrims way back in 1975. It was the first step on a long road to the ultimate glory: being England's caretaker manager for one match.

2 CUP TRAILBLAZERS
Boston's 6-1 second-round win over Derby in 1955 is the FA Cup's largest victory by a non-league side away to a Football League club. It earned them a trip to Tottenham, where 10,000 Pilgrims made the pilgrimage to London for a 4-0 loss.

3 GAZZA IN THE HOUSE
With an eye on management, Paul Gascoigne, then 37, joined Boston as a player-coach to great fanfare in 2004. He made a handful of appearances and turned down *I'm A Celebrity... Get Me Out Of Here!* to stay with the League Two club, only to retire after just three months, even after losing "a stone and a half in four weeks" to get fit, according to manager Steve Evans.

4 EVANS ABOVE
That's right: the man who just took Stevenage into League One managed Gazza – but only after returning from a 20-month FA ban, with a 12-month suspended prison term. Evans had pleaded guilty to falsifying Boston players' contracts over five years to hoodwink the taxman – pretty successfully, too, given their rise from the Southern League – but escaped jail and went on to lead another seven Football League clubs. That showed him.

5 NEXT SLIDE, PLEASE
During the pandemic, deputy chief medical officer and season ticket holder Jonathan Van-Tam was Boston's most famous fan. JVT made odd footballing references at COVID briefings – comparing the vaccine roll-out to a 70th-minute equaliser was still less confusing than most politicians managed – and took Chris Whitty to a match.

LEAGUE TWO NEWS

CRYPTO CHAOS

Many Crawley supporters thought their club might embark on a financially-fuelled rise through the divisions when a cryptocurrency consortium took charge – but the value of investments can go down as well as up...

A club going nowhere in the lower reaches of the English pyramid is suddenly purchased by North Americans who seem to live in a different world. It's a familiar story. Unfortunately for Crawley Town supporters, their script is more Brothers Grimm than the happy fairytale currently unfolding at Wrexham.

The League Two outfit were bought by crypto consortium WAGMI United in April 2022 – WAGMI standing for We're All Gonna Make It. The mysterious group was fronted by Eben Smith and Preston Johnson (below), a sports data analyst who worked for ESPN, among others. WAGMI promised to take Crawley to the Premier League through the sale of NFTs (non-fungible tokens – remember them?) and by building an international fanbase to sit alongside the hardy few who lined the terraces in their council-owned Broadfield Stadium in West Sussex. The Red Devils styled themselves as "The Internet's Team".

Things started well. Crawley signed League Two's top scorer from 2021-22, Dom Telford, before WAGMI raised £3.5 million in the first NFT drop ahead of the new campaign. Anyone who bought an NFT for £355 earned a package that included voting rights on club decisions, a special third kit and other digital content.

But things soured fast. Instead of chasing a play-off place, Town ended the 2022-23 season in 22nd: their worst finish in their 12 years in the Football League, and just three points above relegation to non-league. Five managers took charge, popular players exited, the crypto market dipped alarmingly and the Crawley Town Supporters Alliance (CTSA) called for the heads of Smith, Johnson and interim CEO Chris Galley.

"We never really had a good spell at any stage of the whole season," says Sam Jordan, deputy chair of the CTSA. "And WAGMI have now totally changed because the fans have turned on them. I understand why they've gone to ground, because the fans aren't happy, but as leaders they should be standing up and answering questions, and they haven't. They're not willing to listen to advice, either."

Among the CTSA's gripes are the absence of a CEO with relevant football experience; the owners' lack of transparency since a raft of controversial player sales







in January led to Matthew Etherington's departure as manager; concerns over the anonymity of WAGMI members; and ownership practices that have gone against the grain. The most notable of these was asking three members of 'The Sidemen' – a YouTube collective boasting more than 130 million subscribers combined – to train with the club following a charity game, before suggesting that one of them might play for Crawley in the FA Cup.

Johnson, for his part, sees these kinds of stunts as the only way to achieve WAGMI's wildly ambitious aims, and points to social media growth and money raised for charity as positives. He says WAGMI came into a club that weren't paying utility bills and had huge debts, and were then immediately hit with the news that boss John Yems had allegedly created a culture of racism at the club. Yems was banned by Crawley almost immediately after WAGMI arrived and is now suspended from football until early 2026.

"Ultimately, I think the main thing is that if you're winning football matches, then the local supporters don't care as much about what content we're putting out or what unique strategies we're trying," explains Johnson. "The slow start didn't allow us to dig into our overall thesis and strategy of building an international audience for a local club that loses millions of pounds a year and has no way to generate additional revenue to sustain itself."

An already strained relationship between Johnson and the fans nosedived when he took to the dugout for a defeat to Stevenage in late December (left). This came hours after Etherington and his assistant, Simon Davies, had resigned just 34 days into their reign. The former West Ham wideman walked away following the agreed sale of striker Tom Nichols to Gillingham, which led to WAGMI making Nichols unavailable for selection until the transfer went through, while justifying the deal by saying that he and Telford were too short to play together up front.

"If he'd done all of that a bit differently, like not use the FA Cup for The Sidemen [bottom left] rather than bring the competition into disrepute and make us a laughing stock, I don't think there would be too many complaints," says Jordan.

"I absolutely understand Preston's perspective on going in the dugout – that he was doing it to support the players – but any decent CEO would have said, 'Don't do it. It's not the right thing to do'."

Johnson doesn't regret that decision, and is quick to reject reports that he tried to make a substitution but misunderstood the rules. For him, the Yems case undermined the season but progress has been made off the pitch, with improved training facilities, a higher average attendance, cheaper tickets and a healthier financial position. In fact, he intends to double down on WAGMI's vision.

"I think one of the biggest mistakes we've made is not trusting the numbers and the data right away, and putting too much stock in traditional football scouting and recruitment – trusting football people," Johnson tells *FFT*.

This is one major point of conflict between WAGMI and parts of the fanbase. To both sides, the balance seems off between "The Internet's Team" and the grassroots club who have spent only three years of their history above the fourth tier. Supporters feel that their owners don't understand the game beyond the numbers. Johnson believes wholeheartedly in the data and feels criticism has occasionally gone too far.

"THE WAGMI OWNERS HAVE NOW TOTALLY CHANGED BECAUSE THE FANBASE HAS TURNED ON THEM"

When he became the face of the takeover, he spent a lot of time in the town, even in a local pub, buying a pint for any fans who wanted one. Treatment for a melanoma – eventually successful – meant he had to go back to the USA soon after. However, he feels that such a high level of engagement early on means that when he and WAGMI withdrew in January after Etherington's departure, the Sidemen issue and the dugout incident, it was viewed in a worse light than it would have been for more distant owners.

Johnson says, "I was constantly online, which is also part of the fun and an interesting aspect, for the fans to interact with me regularly. I'd always answer DMs. But they turned quickly when we weren't winning, and you start getting threats.

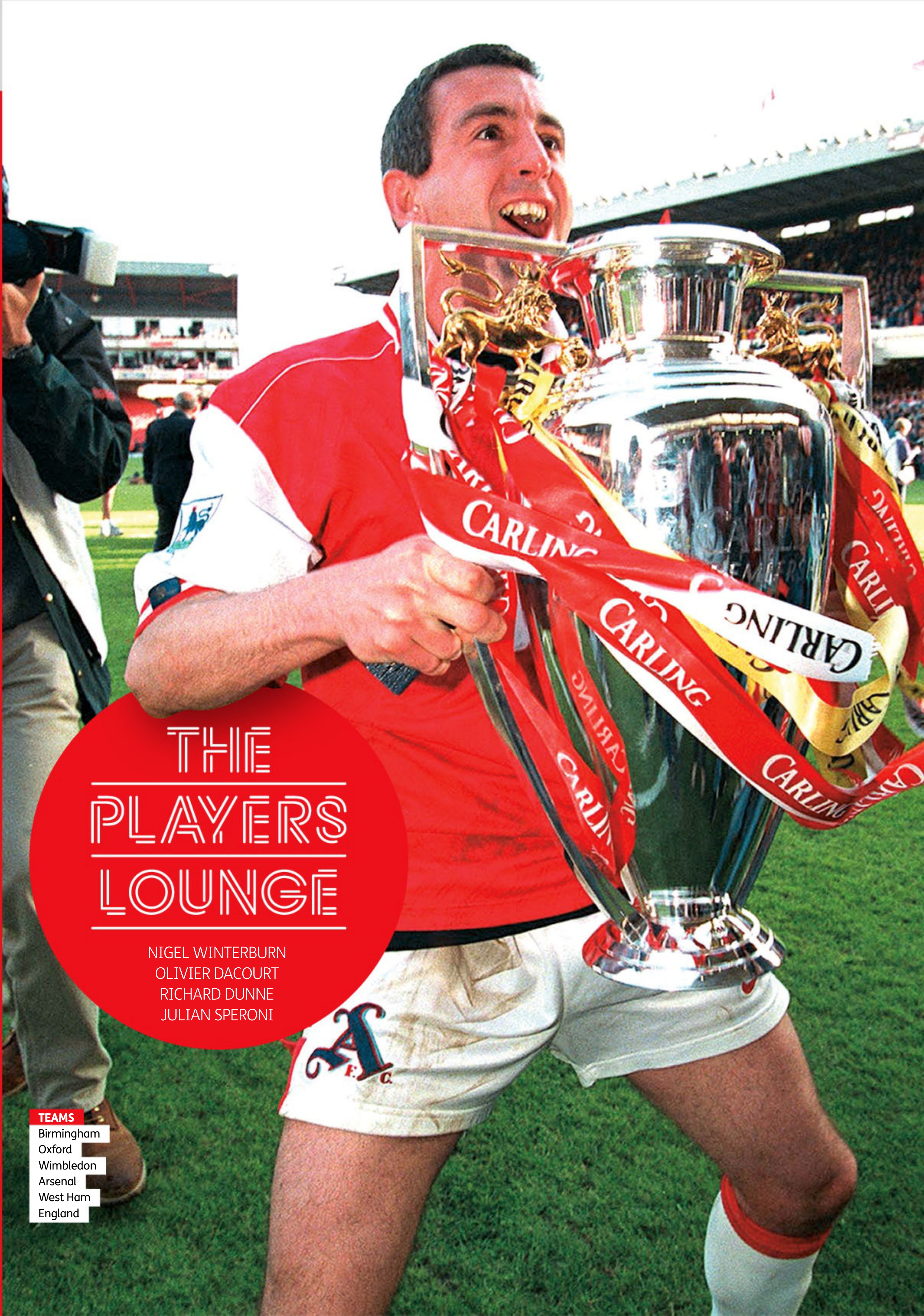
"Some fans reached out to me in a private fan group chat, saying, 'There's groups of fans coming together that want to fight you and they know you're staying at the Sandman hotel'. So, I left the next morning and went to London instead. That's probably over the line. I know that this is their life, their football club, but it affected me from an emotional standpoint, for sure."

It's difficult for anyone to know where to go from here. The CTSA say, "Communication between the current top-level management and the fanbase has broken down irretrievably." Johnson, though, defends WAGMI's record and expects a more stable campaign under ex-Swindon boss Scott Lindsey to give Crawley a chance to reap rewards from their unconventional approach. But NFT drops to raise millions can't keep happening every season – scarcity is key.

Crawley's task will be even tougher next year, with Wrexham joining League Two. Some fans want their own American chiefs to take a leaf out of the Ryan Reynolds and Rob McElhenney playbook, but WAGMI will do things their own way. It won't be dull.

Matt Pearson

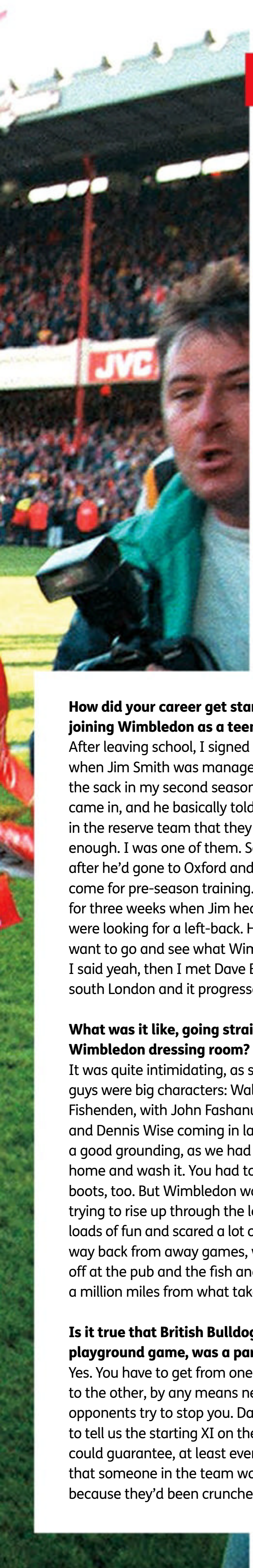




THE PLAYERS LOUNGE

NIGEL WINTERBURN
OLIVIER DACOURT
RICHARD DUNNE
JULIAN SPERONI

TEAMS
Birmingham
Oxford
Wimbledon
Arsenal
West Ham
England



NIGEL WINTERBURN

"WE'D PLAY BRITISH BULLDOG IN TRAINING AT WIMBLEDON AND SOMEBODY ALWAYS ENDED UP INJURED!"

Arsenal's legendary left-back recalls his Dons baptism of fire and *slightly* duller practice sessions under George Graham

Interview James Hilsum

How did your career get started, up to joining Wimbledon as a teenager in 1983?
After leaving school, I signed for Birmingham when Jim Smith was manager. But Jim got the sack in my second season, Ron Saunders came in, and he basically told a lot of players in the reserve team that they weren't good enough. I was one of them. So, I called Jim after he'd gone to Oxford and asked if I could come for pre-season training. I'd been there for three weeks when Jim heard Wimbledon were looking for a left-back. He said, "Do you want to go and see what Wimbledon's like?" I said yeah, then I met Dave Bassett down in south London and it progressed from there.

What was it like, going straight into that Wimbledon dressing room?
It was quite intimidating, as some of those guys were big characters: Wally Downes, Paul Fishenden, with John Fashanu, Vinnie Jones and Dennis Wise coming in later. It gave you a good grounding, as we had to take our kit home and wash it. You had to buy your own boots, too. But Wimbledon was a small club trying to rise up through the leagues. We had loads of fun and scared a lot of teams. On the way back from away games, we used to stop off at the pub and the fish and chip shop. It's a million miles from what takes place today.

Is it true that British Bulldog, the infamous playground game, was a part of training?
Yes. You have to get from one side of the field to the other, by any means necessary, while opponents try to stop you. Dave Bassett used to tell us the starting XI on the Friday, but you could guarantee, at least every other week, that someone in the team wouldn't make it because they'd been crunched in that game!

How did the move to Arsenal come about in 1987? Was leaving Wimbledon tough?
It wasn't very difficult, because a big team had come in for me. I got a phone call from Sam Hammam, the owner and chairman of Wimbledon, who told me that the club had agreed a price with Arsenal and that George Graham would ring me to sort it out. I went to Highbury on my own and was blown away by those marble halls. I was absolutely sure I wanted to go there. They could have offered me any amount of cash they wanted – which George did, because as we know, he's pretty tight – and I signed straight away.

His defensive training had a reputation for being tedious. Was it that bad?
There would be a fair few moans and groans if any coach today asked their back four to do the stuff we did. Sometimes we didn't even have a football to play with – we literally just moved into positions on the pitch. The idea of the drills was that wherever George went, the player who was closest to him had to move in relation to him. The others had to move the same distance – sideways, forwards, backwards – so that we always kept the same distance between the four of us. We did that twice a week, relentlessly. It was boring, but it made us into a fantastic back four.



How important was George Graham's management in the build-up to that title decider against Liverpool in 1989?
George was calm and relaxed, as he always is. Everyone just thought that we'd be gung-ho because we had to score two goals against Liverpool. But George was stressing not to concede because, if we did, it would be over – to score three goals at Anfield was simply unheard of. He said that if we scored at any time, then Liverpool would have a massive decision to make. He suspected they might panic. And then history changed in that final minute. If you look at some of the Liverpool players, they thought the league was theirs... and then it was snatched away.

How did the Arsenal squad rally around Tony Adams when his drinking problems became public?
We weren't really aware of it, because we were all drinking at the time and that was the culture in football. When Tony initially came out and revealed he was an alcoholic, I think there was a bit of disbelief because everyone liked to go for a drink and I'd never discussed it with him directly. Tony thought it was disrupting his life and he needed to make a change. With him being an England international, he had a high profile anyway and the story would make its way into the papers. Obviously, he spent that brief time inside prison; we all wrote to him and knew he'd come back a stronger person. We just accepted it and knew we'd be without him for a while. But we also knew we'd have an unbelievable player returning to our squad once he got out.

Where do Arsenal's '97-98 Double winners rank among all of the teams you played in?
For technical ability and style of play, it would be my favourite. It was strong and powerful and it could play football too, but if anybody wanted to try to rough us up, we could give as good as what we were taking. It's right up there with the '89 and '91 teams, but just for sheer style and some of the guys who came in, that was No.1 for me.

You earned only two England caps in your career. Did you ever receive a valid reason as to why you weren't picked more often?
No. I just wasn't good enough, I think. In that period, England had the likes of Stuart Pearce and Tony Dorigo as left-backs. You can only do what you're capable of with your club. If different managers who are managing the national side decide you're not for them, then you simply get on with it. I knew that if I was playing for two title-winning Arsenal teams – in '89 and '91 – and still not getting picked for England, then I never would. In the end, you block it out. I didn't look at the squads. In fact, for a couple of the squads I was called into, I didn't know I was in them – someone had to come and tell me. But I'm proud that I played twice, against Italy at Wembley, then against West Germany – limited minutes, but against two extremely good teams. It was never something I worried much about, though.

Nigel Winterburn was speaking to FFT courtesy of Freebets.com

OLIVIER DACOURT

"I SUED TRUMP, NOT KNOWING THAT SOMEDAY HE WOULD BE US PRESIDENT"

The former Everton and Leeds man on clay pigeon shooting with Gerry Marsden and falling out with Raymond Domenech

Interview Simon Yaffe

As somebody born in the Parisian suburb of Montreuil, why do you think that Paris and its surrounding regions have produced so many high-quality footballers?
It's crazy how many of us come from there, but you have to remember that, for many of us, we only had football. I just wanted to be a footballer. Actually, I was good at tennis as well, but I only wanted to play football.

When you started out at Strasbourg, the club had very good players such as Franck Sauzée, Frank Leboeuf and Aleksandr Mostovoi, and beat Liverpool and Rangers in the UEFA Cup before running Ronaldo's Inter close. What made that team special?
I was lucky enough to learn my trade with so many good team-mates who had loads of experience. They didn't mind when I asked them plenty of questions, and they'd tell me if I'd played well and if I hadn't. The most important thing I learned was to work hard.

When Everton came calling in 1998, they had just narrowly avoided the drop. Were there any other teams interested in you?
Many French sides were after me. I nearly signed for Bordeaux, but they couldn't afford the transfer fee Strasbourg wanted. Everton had a new manager, Walter Smith, who had seen me play against Rangers when he was their manager, and he showed huge desire to sign me which was really important. We had a hard start to the season because there were high expectations after we also signed Marco Materazzi, John Collins and Ibrahima Bakayoko, but then Kevin Campbell joined us from Trabzonspor and scored a lot of goals.

Is it true that you lived next door to Gerry Marsden of Gerry and the Pacemakers?
[*Smiles*] Yes, that's absolutely true. Gerry was unbelievable with me, and I actually didn't know anything about his music background. He took me to play golf and we went clay pigeon shooting. He didn't have to do that, but he was a very kind person. I was sad when I received the call [in 2021] to tell me that he had died. But he'd had a great life.

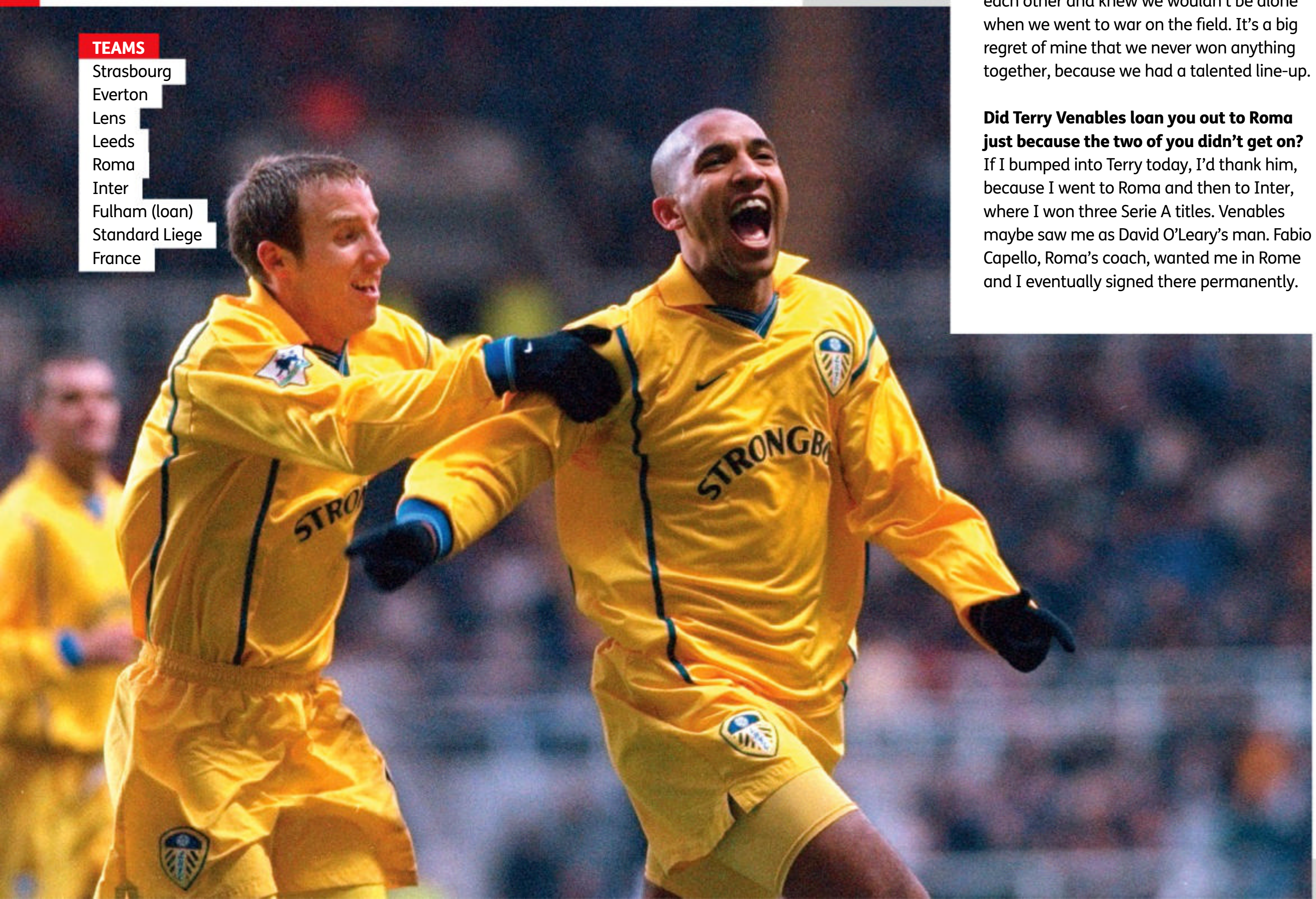
After one season, you were booed in your final Everton game having told a French newspaper that you expected to leave...
I never said I wanted to leave; Everton had to sell me for financial reasons. I had a fantastic season there – I was so happy and felt that the supporters loved me. It just so happened that my final appearance as a professional was against Everton, for Fulham, and when I went over to the Everton fans, they sang my name which was amazing. They made me cry. We had some good times together.

Why did you soon return to England, this time with Leeds, after just a year at Lens?
I didn't want to leave England, but Lens put an offer on the table and Everton needed the money. I'd had three years left at Everton. It was my dream to play in the Premier League, so I was happy that another chance arrived.

And David O'Leary was putting together an excellent team at Leeds in 2000 when you joined for a club-record £7.2 million – Harry Kewell, Jonathan Woodgate, then yourself, Mark Viduka and Rio Ferdinand all signing...
We now have a WhatsApp group made up of team-mates from that Leeds squad. It's the only one I'm in from all of the clubs I played for. There was an outstanding atmosphere among us, on and off the pitch: we fought for each other and knew we wouldn't be alone when we went to war on the field. It's a big regret of mine that we never won anything together, because we had a talented line-up.

Did Terry Venables loan you out to Roma just because the two of you didn't get on?
If I bumped into Terry today, I'd thank him, because I went to Roma and then to Inter, where I won three Serie A titles. Venables maybe saw me as David O'Leary's man. Fabio Capello, Roma's coach, wanted me in Rome and I eventually signed there permanently.

TEAMS
- Strasbourg
- Everton
- Lens
- Leeds
- Roma
- Inter
- Fulham (loan)
- Standard Liege
- France



Was it a similar situation at Inter with Jose Mourinho? He hardly picked you, after you had been part of the Roberto Mancini team that ended Inter's 17 years without a title.
The difference between him and Venables was that I have a lot of respect for Mourinho. I loved him. I understand that he had a very difficult job to do, with 25 players to choose from. I loved training and watching how he motivated his team – under him, we learned how to be winners. I said to Mourinho that I knew I was the best in each training session, and that would mean he'd need to question whether I'd play or not. That's the way I am. It stems from my background: you have to work for what you want in life, and fight for everything. That was always my mentality.

You had a short loan spell at Fulham under another ex-Inter coach, Roy Hodgson. How did you find life at Craven Cottage?
I signed in the January [2009] when we were something like 15th in the league, but ended up coming seventh and qualifying for Europe. The following season, that team reached the Europa League final against Atletico Madrid, beating Juventus en route. Maybe I brought a different mentality into Fulham, in terms of my experience of winning titles in Serie A.

You won 21 caps for France, and appeared in the Confederations Cup and at the 1996 Olympics, but your only major tournament was Euro 2004. Is that disappointing?
I have a very strong character, and ahead of the 2006 World Cup I was a little injured and argued with the coach, Raymond Domenech. To be honest, if I'd been called up for a major competition and was then sat on the bench, I wouldn't have been happy as I wanted to play all the time. I know that's selfish, but if you had a bit of personality about you, then it was a challenge with Domenech. If I wasn't a strong character, I don't think I'd have had the career I did.

You once sued Donald Trump. Tell us more about how that happened...
[*Laughs*] Yes! Wow, that was a long time ago. As investors we bought some apartments in Manhattan, but there was a lot of trouble with it so we sued Trump because he was the previous owner. There were around 30 of us. Of course, we didn't know that we were suing the future president of America!

Many of your former team-mates became managers, but you went into punditry and now you make documentaries on football. Why did you decide to go in that direction?
To manage even one player can be a problem, never mind dozens more – I think I'd end up killing them all! Young players now are given absolutely everything and don't have to fight for a thing. So if I left one guy on the bench, his agent would come over to me and we'd start fighting, for sure. I respect those who go on to manage because it isn't easy at all, and it's more difficult than ever thanks to social media. I love making documentaries. Maybe I'm a much better documentary maker than I was a footballer!



TEAMS
Everton
Manchester City
Aston Villa
QPR
Republic of Ireland

RICHARD DUNNE

"IT WAS A HANDBALL BY THIERRY HENRY BUT, IN HINDSIGHT, I'D HAVE PROBABLY DONE THE SAME THING"

Memories of Manchester City's Abu Dhabi transformation and Robinho's shock arrival are also laid bare by the big Irishman...

Interview Sean Cole

You came through the ranks at Everton before moving to Manchester City in 2000, aged 21. What prompted the transfer?
I played almost every game under Walter Smith at Everton. I was enjoying it, but an offer came in from Wimbledon and Everton accepted it. I had my medical, visited the training ground, met the players, then went home to get my stuff and flew to London the next day. One of the directors met me at Heathrow and said, "Sorry, the deal's off; we have no money." I was like, 'What the f**k am I supposed to do?' As we waited for the next flight back, my agent got a call from Joe Royle. We sorted it that day. It was strange: I thought I was going to Wimbledon, and a day later I was training at Manchester City.

What was it like to be part of the City side that stormed the second tier in 2001-02?
It was brilliant. We had a really strong squad: goalscorers, fast players – a bit of everything. In Eyal Berkovic and Ali Benarbia, we had two creative players just way above anything else in the league. I imagine it was like how the City players feel now: knowing they're going to dominate games and score goals. We had belief that we'd perform every week.

What made your partnership with Sylvain Distin in City's central defence so effective?
It was strange: we lived in the same small apartment block but never really mixed as friends, but on the pitch it seemed to work well. We had that balance of Sylvain being ▸

left-sided and me being right-sided, and we were similarly determined. I knew that I could go and attack the ball because Sylvain would cover me if I didn't get it, and I hope he had the same confidence in me. We understood each other's games and trusted each other – it just seemed to click.

Tell us your favourite Manchester derby...
The last derby at Maine Road, in 2002, was a huge occasion. Shaun Goater got the goals in a 3-1 win; the feeling of being underdogs and turning over the reigning champions was incredible. There was also the first one at the Etihad Stadium, when Shaun Wright-Phillips scored a wonder-goal in the final minute – the noise, the atmosphere, the belief... you can almost recreate the game in your head.

On the final day in 2004-05, City needed a goal to beat Middlesbrough and qualify for Europe, so Stuart Pearce put David James up front. What was that all about?
I haven't a clue. I'd just had an operation, so I wasn't involved. I remember turning up and the kitman saying, "Wait until you see this". He pulled out an outfield jersey with 'James 1' on the back and I was like, 'What's going on?' As bizarre as it was – and I can imagine it was difficult for the forwards on the bench who didn't come on – he actually caused a lot of trouble: we won a penalty by having him up there. He wasn't the greatest centre-forward, but he was very awkward.

What was the season like with Sven-Goran Eriksson and owner Thaksin Shinawatra?
I loved it under Eriksson and Hans Backe, his assistant: the training was brilliant, everyone was happy and the place was positive. But there was background noise. They'd say they were going to do something, or sign a certain player, then it wouldn't happen. It just never felt like it was going to last. There wasn't that stability to help us believe, as they have now.

The 2008 Abu Dhabi takeover transformed the club. Describe that early period...
It was impossible to imagine, in your wildest dreams, that City would go on to achieve so much and become what they have. That first day, they bought the club and were trying to sign literally anyone who would come – you start thinking, 'My god, we need to break into the top four or five before players will take us seriously', but obviously money talks.

How did the players react to the headline signing of Robinho?
We were excited: he was a huge name and a top player, then he scored a free-kick on his debut against Chelsea. You almost think, 'How's he going to fit in with the rest of us?', but he was superb. We had several Brazilian lads at the time who all got on well.

CEO Garry Cook once said, "'Richard Dunne' doesn't roll off the tongue in Beijing' when talking about the club's global ambitions – how did that make you feel?
We'd had a couple of meetings prior to that and he wasn't someone I particularly liked,



so it didn't surprise me. He wasn't a football person and I didn't have much respect for him. It was almost, 'Forget the football – we just want to sell jerseys', while I thought the club needed to concentrate on getting better.

After nine years at City, what did you make of the way your departure was handled?
It was annoying because they were trying to sign John Terry during pre-season in South Africa. I asked, "Am I leaving?" and the staff said, "No, he's going to play with you" – so they were all lying, which I didn't appreciate. I didn't feel that I needed to just sit around.

How did you feel about joining Aston Villa for a fresh start?
I loved it. I had a few options, but I spoke to Martin O'Neill and liked what he was about: being honest, playing your game and giving 100 per cent. He brought out that drive inside each player to perform every day.

What was Harry Redknapp like at QPR?
He was more of a man-manager. He'd try to understand you as both a player and person and get the best out of you. He knew what type of players he wanted and trusted. If you did right by him, he'd give you that belief and confidence to go and perform each week. He demanded high standards and rewarded you when you met them.

What are the highlights from your 80 caps with the Republic of Ireland?
I'd always wanted to represent my country and play against the best in the world. I got to be part of a World Cup and a Euros. I had the opportunity to play the likes of Brazil and Argentina. It was wonderful. Every time you met up with the squad, you wanted to be the best you possibly could. It was important to leave a mark; to show that this Ireland team is horrible to play against. We should have reached more than two tournaments during that period, but we were always competitive and made it difficult for the bigger nations.

Thierry Henry's handball helped to deny the Republic of Ireland a place at the 2010 World Cup. What are your memories of it?
France had beaten us 1-0 in Dublin four days earlier, so we had nothing to lose – it was all about trying to put them under pressure. We performed well. Their goal towards the end was a long ball that went over my head; I fell to the floor and the next thing I knew, it was in the back of the net. All of our players were chasing the referee, so I knew something had gone on, but I hadn't seen it. It was definitely a handball but, in hindsight, I probably would have done it myself.

JULIAN SPERONI

"AHEAD OF THE 2014 WORLD CUP, I WAS THE ONLY ARGENTINE KEEPER FACING TOP PLAYERS – I NEVER RECEIVED ONE CAP"

The glovesman on Dundee's Argentine revolution, loving Neil Warnock and spending 15 years with Crystal Palace

Interview Simon Yaffe

You kicked off your career with Platense in Argentina, but made just two appearances before joining Dundee in 2001. How did the move to Scotland materialise?
In most cases, you play well in your country first and then you may get spotted by a club in Europe. Dundee had an Italian manager, Ivano Bonetti, who worked with some agents from Argentina. I sent them my CV – don't forget, there was no YouTube or anything like that – and it found its way to Bonetti. They were looking to sign a young goalkeeper and gave me an opportunity.

Dundee signed some famous names in the early 2000s, such as Claudio Caniggia and Temuri Ketsbaia, but their time at the club was brief. As arguably their top player, why did you stay for three years?
I knew nothing about Dundee – only Rangers and Celtic. Dundee had signed a few massive names, then Claudio came along – a big hero in Argentina – and the proposal from Dundee became even more interesting. I didn't speak English, but we had seven Argentines in the side so it was like being back at home; it was handy in terms of settling in, but I didn't pick up much English. After Ivano left, we signed more Scottish players, so I was forced to learn the language. Making friends with a group of local people also helped.

A number of outfits were keen on signing you but in 2004 you joined Crystal Palace, who'd just been promoted to the Premier League. Why did you pick them?
Crystal Palace were tracking my progress and decided to give me a chance in the Premier League, so there wasn't much to think about.

Other clubs wanted me too, but Palace was always going to be my first choice, mainly as the goalkeeping coach was Mike Kelly and I'd been told that he was one of the best in the country. It was a big move from Dundee, but London reminded me of Buenos Aires, my home city.

Did you think about leaving Palace when your lost your place to Gabor Kiraly, having started as first choice after your arrival?
I was disappointed because I'd been brought in as the No.1 and needed time to settle in the Premier League. Gabor, who was a great goalkeeper and a lovely person, came in and he was more experienced than me. Results hadn't been going our way, so the manager, Iain Dowie, chose to put Gabor in goal. With time, you learn that the manager only wants the best for the team, but it was still pretty frustrating to lose my place, even if it was to a nice guy. I backed Gabor and wanted him to show his best every week, but it was hard for me personally.

How important was that final-day match against Sheffield Wednesday in May 2010, when Palace avoided defeat to stay in the Championship at Wednesday's expense?
That season was a difficult one for us. We'd actually been pushing to reach the play-offs and then, all of a sudden, the club went into administration, had points deducted and went into a relegation battle. I don't know if it was psychological but we just couldn't win a game after that, even though we were the same group of players who had started the season strongly. It was a very tense match against Wednesday – one of those when you don't enjoy the build-up or the game, as it's so nerve-wracking. But if you get the result you want, you can look back and appreciate the game more. It was a really special day.

You hold the record for most appearances made by a Crystal Palace goalkeeper. What makes the club so special for you?
I never thought that I'd spend 15 years as a player at Palace. You get to know the people who work for the club, and the fans, and it becomes part of your family. Usually a player from abroad will spend two or three years at a club, then go home; I enjoyed my football and my family were happy, so I kept signing new deals. Even now, whenever I see Palace fans, I feel the love they've constantly shown me. No matter where I go around the world, I bump into Palace fans who remember me playing for their club. It's always amazing to share memories with them. We're all part of the same family.

Is it true that one of your Palace gaffers, Neil Warnock, asked Diego Maradona to name you in his Argentina squad for the 2010 World Cup?
Neil always asked me why I wasn't involved at international level. I really thought I had a shot at being called up for the 2014 World Cup in Brazil, because I was playing regularly in the Premier League and was, at that time, probably the only Argentine keeper facing top players every week. However, Sergio Romero, even though he didn't play much for his club, was the established No.1. I didn't understand why I wasn't at least selected in the squad. I never won an Argentina cap despite playing at a high level in England for many seasons – I played for the under-20 side but never the senior team. It'll always be a regret of mine in an otherwise incredible career.

After working with so many iconic British managers, like Neil Warnock, Alan Pardew, Ian Holloway and Tony Pulis, who did you find the most influential?
I loved Neil and his approach to the game. Now that I'm a coach myself, I think about why those managers did certain things; how they spoke to players. I was also coached by Tata Martino, who went on to Barcelona, and Jose Pekerman, who managed the Argentina national team. I took a lot from all of them.

You returned to Palace last year as a youth academy goalkeeping coach. Where do you hope your journey takes you?
I have the passion of a boss burning within me. I love coaching goalkeepers and seeing the kids develop, but I've done my B Licence and will be doing the A Licence this year – then I can see what opportunities come up.

Due to your paternal family heritage, you could have qualified to represent Italy instead of Argentina. Was playing for the Azzurri ever an option?
I have Italian citizenship, but I don't think I'd have chosen to do so because my heart is with Argentina. I do love Italy, though, and I remember my grandma cooking us Italian food. Funnily enough, my son, who's a keeper in the Palace academy, could have the pick of four different nations if he decides to turn professional: Argentina, England – where he was born and raised – Italy and also Spain, as my wife is of Spanish background. All of my children consider themselves to be English, but we try to talk Spanish with them at home and my son is into *mate* [a South American caffeinated herbal drink].

Your wife is a professional artist and has painted some well-known football grounds, including Selhurst Park. Is art something you're interested in, too?
I can't draw a thing, but Marina has had this hobby her whole life. It's fantastic what she can do, and sometimes I'll sit watching her draw and think, 'Wow, how can you do that?' She posted a painting online that she'd done of Selhurst Park and loads of Palace fans got in touch, asking how they could order a copy, so it carried on from there.

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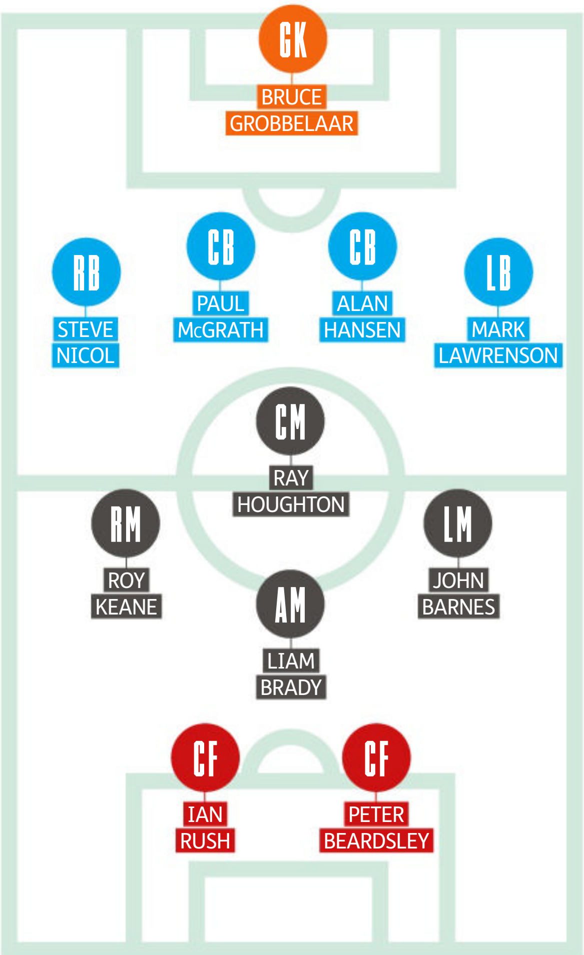
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MY PERFECT XI

JOHN ALDRIDGE



The goal machine includes a mixture of players from the great Liverpool side he spearheaded, as well as a sprinkling of team-mates with the Republic of Ireland...



THE GAFFER



JACK CHARLTON
"Easy: I loved him. Even now, I miss him. I owe him so much, as his first 'Granny Rule' capture, because I had the greatest 10 years playing for the Republic of Ireland and winning 69 caps."

THE SUBS

01 BILLY HAMILTON

02 STEVE STAUNTON

03 RONNIE WHELAN

+STEVE McMAHON

BRUCE GROBBELAAR
"My goalkeeper would have to be Bruce. He was an eccentric guy, but so agile – some of the saves he pulled off were just ridiculous. He was probably one of the first keepers who was also decent with his feet. He'd come out and win the ball, and was extremely good at it. He'd play outfield in five-a-side matches at training, and did well at that too."

STEVE NICOL
"Steve could drink like a fish and eat all the s**t in the world, yet look like a greyhound! He could score 10 or 12 goals a season from right-back. He was astounding – absolutely brilliant. He was a solid defender, but going forward, you look at Trent Alexander-Arnold and Nicol was like that: top-quality."

PAUL McGRATH
"When I played for Liverpool and faced Paul against Manchester United or Aston Villa, or during Ireland training, he was always one of the hardest defenders to beat. We know he had injuries and couldn't practise, but he was remarkable – his strength was unreal."

ALAN HANSEN
"Hansen is one of the greatest centre-halves in Liverpool history. Only Virgil van Dijk and Phil Thompson come close. We've had some fantastic centre-backs down the years, but Alan was a very special player for the Reds."

MARK LAWRENSON
"At left-back I'd have Lawro, who could also play at centre-half. He was another top, top defender, and now the *Match of the Day* duo are next to each other in my defence!"

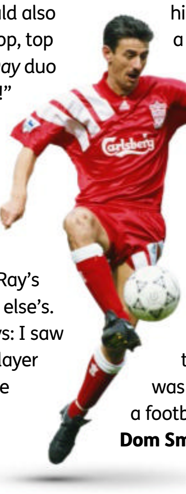
RAY HOUGHTON
"The best football player amongst all of us in that famous Liverpool side. He was outrageously good and so skilful – a wonderful player, and an absolute dream to play with. Ray's football brain was ahead of everyone else's. I remember him from his Fulham days: I saw him on television and said, 'What a player this bloke is!' The next thing I know, we were the closest of friends for both Liverpool and Ireland."

ROY KEANE
"Keane is one of the finest midfielders I've ever seen – he was phenomenal, absolutely phenomenal. What can you say about Roy that's not been said? Every team would want a player like him in it."

JOHN BARNES
"He's the best player I played alongside, and it's as simple as that. He was strong, quick – he could run as fast with the ball as he could without it – and his deliveries were amazing. His service into the penalty box was the main reason why I became First Division top scorer in 1988. People expected too much from him in an England shirt, because he was so good for Liverpool – he was the number one threat. He was stifled a bit playing for England. They didn't utilise him right, in my opinion."

LIAM BRADY
"Liam Brady had the best left foot you could ever dream of – just insane. You couldn't get the ball off him. Imagine that midfield four: Houghton, Barnes, Keane and Brady. Wow! Liam would be the one you'd give the most licence to get upfield. In terms of midfielders, I'm going to request a fourth substitute and pick Steve McMahon. He'd never speak to me again if I left him out!"

IAN RUSH
"I was in the same team as Ian [below] after he came back to Liverpool from Juventus in 1988. He'd lost a little of what he had in his first spell with Liverpool, but what a magnificent player he still was: the best goalscorer I've witnessed."



PETER BEARDSLEY
"In terms of skill and ability, Peter was off the scale! Some of the goals he scored were just... well, I couldn't believe some of them. Peter loved to shoot on sight. Him and Barnes used to combine really well and I'd link up loads with Houghton – that's why the balance of that side was so good. But Peter Beardsley: what a footballer. What a talent."

Dom Smith

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